



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>

A PROFESSIONAL

BEAUTY



600064273S



A PROFESSIONAL BEAUTY

A

PROFESSIONAL BEAUTY

BY
MRS. ALEXANDER FRASER

AUTHOR OF "HER FLIGHTED TROTH," "A FATAL PASSION," "GUARDIAN
AND LOVER," ETC. ETC. ETC.

"Thy favours are but like the wind,
That kisseth everything it meets;
And since thou canst with more than one,
Thou'rt worthy to be loved by none!"

HERRICK

In Three Volumes
VOL. II.



LONDON:
TINSLEY BROTHERS, 8, CATHERINE ST., STRAND, W.C.
1882

251. i. 767.

**CHARLES DICKENS AND EVANS,
CRYSTAL PALACE PRESS**

CONTENTS.

CHAPTER I.

	PAGE
A DECLARATION	1

CHAPTER II.

"IF HE BUT LOVED ME!".	26
--------------------------------	----

CHAPTER III.

PITY IS AKIN TO LOVE	51
--------------------------------	----

CHAPTER IV.

FOR CONSCIENCE' SAKE	66
--------------------------------	----

CHAPTER V.

	PAGE
MAN AND WIFE	77

CHAPTER VI.

CAN-CAN	109
-------------------	-----

CHAPTER VII.

C'EST LE PREMIER PAS QUI COUTE	143
------------------------------------------	-----

CHAPTER VIII.

ONLY A LULL	159
-----------------------	-----

CHAPTER IX.

THE LEGEND OF "HERMIA"	177
----------------------------------	-----

CHAPTER X.

A JEALOUS MAN SLEEPS DOG'S SLEEP.	214
-------------------------------------------	-----

CONTENTS.

vii

CHAPTER XI.

	PAGE
ANGUIS IN HERBA	226

CHAPTER XII.

STRANGERS YET	240
-------------------------	-----

CHAPTER XIII.

"LA REINE EST MORTE! VIVE LA REINE!" .	254
----------------------------------------	-----



A PROFESSIONAL BEAUTY.

CHAPTER I.

A DECLARATION.

"The venom clamour of a jealous woman
Poisons more deadly than a mad dog's tooth."

5

BEATRICE, in spite of her sociable quarrel with Benedick, had marked with her quick though apparently lazy eyes, the two figures beside the window. The sight had stirred up her blood to seething point, and her spirits waxed bitter as gall and wormwood. She had always disliked Quita, who she fancied watched her and dogged her steps,

but after that little *tête-à-tête* with Max her feelings rose to absolute hatred. With a nature like Miss Rothes', a nature brimming over with intense selfishness and worldliness, love had indeed worked a marvel when she gave her *heart* to Max, a "nobody," but it was the case; her feelings for him amounting to a fierce overwhelming passion, which she had vainly, for her own sake, tried to stem. In Rome, where art and letters occupy a higher position in the social scale than they do in England, where "money" is the autocrat that rules supreme, Max had held a place as elevated as most of the Beauty's admirers. Amateurs of painting had taken up the handsome young artist, whose name was shadowed by a cruel stain, but whose rising talent commanded respect.

Miss Rothes had heard the story of his life; but, apt to take things on the surface, she had not troubled to find out the right

or the wrong of it, and had simply felt a sort of pity for one who, brought up in the expectation of wealth and luxury, had been driven to earn his own bread.

She quite understood and sympathised with the horrors of poverty, on which she looked as the greatest curse of existence. Of Max's inner life and plans and purposes, she was as ignorant as the babe unborn. It was not likely that to a fashionable beauty, a shallow-hearted butterfly like her, that he had ever dreamt of opening his heart.

Still, it would have been impossible, and even unnatural, in any man to be for ever cold and insensible to a woman, whose face alone was an artist's study, a Swinburnean poetic dream. His senses could not fail to be touched, even if his soul went unscathed through the fiery ordeal.

Max was not an ordinary man. He could not have frittered away his life in the petty

and paltry love-makings and flirtations, that many men do ; but yet he began after a while unconsciously even to watch for the days of his visits to the Palazza Nuova, where Miss Rothés and her mother were staying *en princesse* ; rent and domestic expenditure in Italy being half the sum that an English *ménage* consumes.

And Miss Rothés in turn enjoyed the hours passed in overlooking the sketches in Max's studio, chaperoned by a raw German girl, whom she designated by the title of "*femme de chambre*."

After a short acquaintance, she gave herself entirely up to her new sensation. Max, surrounded by his Lares and Penates, in the shape of plaster heads and arms and limbs, looked doubly picturesque, and was so pleasant and captivating, that she found it futile to struggle against his attractions. He, of course, could not but be aware of the feelings he had excited,

for the Beauty was of a demonstrative character, and would have scouted the idea of letting "Concealment, like a worm, feed on her damask cheek." But, though it cannot be denied that more than once, her dangerous proximity, her seductive eyes, her voice lowered to the exact pitch of tenderness, made his pulse throb a little faster, he never really cared for her.

Then, suddenly, without giving an explanation of his conduct—the motive of which was simply prudence—he absented himself from Rome. And once the subtle influence of his presence removed, Miss Rothes—whose real turn of mind was practical, and who did not lack that "common sense" which especially belongs to commonplace natures—realised the danger she had run in losing her heart to a penniless and nameless individual.

She, too, hastily quitted Italy—returning

to England with the rich prize of her immediate neighbourhood, Erroll Adair, always in view.

It was an unlucky day for her when once more Max Vereker crossed her path. But, whether he was really a blessing or a curse to her, she loved him—loved him as she had never loved any among the legion of admirers that her wonderful but *bizarre* beauty had brought to her feet.

Thus, the knowledge that Max and Quita had been thrown together once or twice, drove her distracted, so that she could neither sleep nor laugh nor speak without an effort; and, above all, her normal healthy appetite deserted her.

And she knew she must suffer, when she turned with distaste from the dainty *entrées* and *entremets* in which she had always delighted.

“What possible right,” she muttered wrathfully, “had that white-faced insig-

nificant girl to *look* even at the man, whom she, Miss Rothes—about whom all the world had gone mad—adored ! ”

Working herself up one day, until she felt that she had but one end or aim in life, and that was to separate Max and Quita, she left the luncheon-table, on pretence of a siesta ; and, slipping noiselessly down the stairs, and through a large glass-door, that led from one of the lower rooms on to the lawn, she fled down a path, flanked on either side by huge rhododendrons and Portugal laurels, until she reached the limit of the Queenscourt grounds ; then, after a quick glance round to mark that no eye was watching, she rapidly traversed a small wood, and, arriving at a sylvan path, halted. From there she could see a row of detached cottages, pretty and artistic, with laurels, tangles of roses, and honeysuckles covering their walls, and giving them a superior air to ordinary homesteads. In one of these,

she had quickly discovered, Max Vereker lodged with old Stephen King, who had been a favourite gamekeeper at The Abbey for half a century.

Suddenly her heart gave a leap, and a crimson flush dyed her cheek, for her eye fell on the figure of a man strolling slowly along.

Whose figure it was instinct at once told her.

Without an instant's hesitation or shyness, she went straight towards him and faced him close before he saw her approach, for he had been walking with his eyes cast downwards, and she startled him out of a little day-dream.

"Pardon my disturbing you, Mr. Vereker," she said abruptly, and yet with an attempt at cold politeness. She was dreadfully irate with him and desperately jealous, but even as she stood looking at him, with a tumult of anger in her breast,

she realised that he was the one man in the world for her.

“You!” he cried, and she saw a little shadow flit over his face which sent a sharp throb of pain through her heart, and she noticed that he did not even proffer a hand-clasp.

“I suppose my presence is rather unexpected; perhaps you hoped to meet someone else?”

“No,” he answered quietly, but his tone was so chilly that it raised at once a barrier between them.

“I wanted a constitutional, Mr. Vereker; the atmosphere of Queenscourt is dreadfully depressing.”

“It is your future home nevertheless,” he remarked by way of saying something.

“My future prison, you mean,” she answered bitterly; “‘but sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.’ Who knows but something may turn up yet to free me;

but, as I was saying, I stole out for a constitutional, and seeing you, I was glad. It was not for your society I came, Mr. Vereker, but simply to get rid of my own."

Her words sounded light and flippant, and Max, who since his misfortunes had become very proud, coloured.

"Pray do not make such excuses for coming; and pray do not believe that my vanity carried me so far as to think my society worth having. To say the truth, in some cases I am not sure I care about its being appreciated."

A rude speech, and one that had best not have been said; but she had brought it on herself, and when he marked the colour flame up in her face, he did not repent having spoken.

She did not answer for a moment, but she glanced at him. He stood before her hat in hand, his figure drawn up to its full

height, the personification of a proud and handsome patrician born to riches and lands and vassals, and, after all—who was he?

Only a miserable struggling artist, a man who did not even own a status.

With these thoughts flashing through her brain, she girded herself afresh in an armour of wrath and jealousy and insolence.

“Indeed I quite appreciate your society, Mr. Vereker, although you may not care if I do; and I have also the greatest sympathy for you when I realise what your feelings must be just round here! I wonder how your pride can stand it.”

He was silent in his turn, but a shade of irony crept to his mouth, and he looked keenly and steadfastly into her eyes.

She felt a little ashamed, but she was resolved not to spare his feelings until she arrived at the subject nearest her heart.

“Forgive me for alluding to your position here, but you *must* know that only

kindliness prompted my remark. Of course *I* feel as grieved about it as you can be, for under the circumstances, you will scarcely be able to remain with us as long as I would hope."

Max hearkened, surprised; but his keenest glance could detect nothing in the beautiful face, that always wore a mask as impenetrable as Richelieu's, save sympathy for his feelings.

"You are going to amuse yourself by putting me through my catechism," he laughed; "but the task will be unsatisfactory, since I am as much in the dark regarding my movements as you are. You will repent standing here, for even professional beauties—privileged as they are in most things—are liable to catarrh and rheumatism, and other ills to which all flesh is heir."

She felt that solicitude for her health had not actuated his remark, and the

feeling did not tend to sweeten her temper ; but to do her justice, control of her temper was one of her best qualities.

“ We will walk on, if you don’t mind,” she said coldly.

“ I was about to go into the cottage, having some letters to write ; but if it is your wish to take a sylvan promenade, of course I am at your service.”

“ It is my wish,” she replied, with the air of an empress.

An awkward silence fell upon them while they strolled on slowly side by side through a delicious old wood, with the long golden sun-rays beginning to slant athwart the brown gnarled oaks and elm trunks, and to quiver and dance on the cool green depths of the foliage. The turf was starred with daisies and blue harebells, and the sky above was as serene and clear as it is in the South.

Suddenly Miss Rothes paused.

"Max," she cried, all her coldness and feigned indolence dispersed to the four winds. The hot vivid colour swept over her face, up to her temples, and to the roots of her hair, and her big black eyes grew almost lurid in the glance. "They tell me you have fallen in love with Quita Heathcote, and I want to know if it is true."

"They! who are *they*?" Max asked, with a smile.

She did not answer.

"They should not take Miss Heathcote's name in vain simply because she has been polite to me, notwithstanding the 'position' which you were good enough to deplore."

"A politeness for which you seem immensely grateful," she sneered.

"I am."

"Bah!" she cried contemptuously. "You know that scores of women would be only

too glad to show you 'politeness,' as you are pleased to call it."

"Granted. Still, if it were so, there are women and *women*. Perhaps I might not be grateful enough in some cases, not half so appreciative, in fact, as I should be."

She flashed a look at him, a look in which her feelings towards Quita were absolutely ghoulish-like.

"I conclude, then, that you consider Miss Heathcote such a pearl above price, that her civility is a thing to go mad over. Can anyone feel what I do for you, and yet how much gratitude do I receive?"

"As much as I dare give to my friend's affianced wife, Miss Rothes," he said gravely.

She frowned.

"After our long acquaintance, Mr. Vereker, I think I owe it to you to tell you one little piece of news, which, perhaps, you may not have heard. It *may* prevent you

losing your heart. Miss Heathcote's people desire a match between her and Mr. Clifford, of Allington, a well-to-do young man, who is madly in love with her."

"Yes."

It was the only word that fell from Max, but he grew some shades paler and a cloud fell over his deep blue eyes.

She waited, pondering whether she had been diplomatic in saying that, or whether she had made a mistake by asserting that Jack Clifford was an admirer of Quita's. Men were so very like a flock of sheep, as a rule, and if one went at a rush, the chances were that the rest would follow suit.

It was Max who broke the silence, controlling a twinge of jealousy of Clifford of Allington, and asking quietly enough: "Do you like Miss Heathcote so much, that you are so careful of her interests?"

"I hate her! I should like to kill her!" nearly burst from Miss Rothes, but she

checked herself, and said plausibly : “ I do not pretend to an enormous interest in her, but she is young and raw—dreadfully raw and absurdly impulsive, and oh ! so wofully ignorant of life and its most ordinary proprieties. I really believe she would show her feelings to any man unreservedly, in sheer crudeness and rusticity. It is such a pity to bring up girls in that way, they are sure to come to grief with someone or other ; and as she is to be connected with me by marriage, I am anxious to have no scandal attached to any member of the family.”

“ Your words are the words of wisdom, and I honour you for them,” answered Max, averting his face so that she should not see the smile on his mouth.

But her eyes were quick, and she knew the man was laughing at her.

“ Another thing, the girl’s marriage with anyone whose position could in any way

be called to account would vex Mrs. Adair, and it would hurt me beyond measure if *you* had to suffer any humiliation."

Max laughed out, a short bitter laugh.

"Thanks ever so much for your kind consideration of my feelings. I know you will be glad to hear that I am growing less thin-skinned every day of my life. But one thing, taking into account our long acquaintance, I think I ought to tell you, and that is, that if I wanted to marry Miss Heathcote I should not allow any-one's wishes to prevent it, provided she cared for me."

He uttered the last words so softly and so dreamily, that she started.

"Which she doesn't!" she blurted out impetuously. "It is only a silly romantic pity she has for you."

"Yes; but don't you know that pity is akin to love?" he asked pleasantly.

"And you are so far gone in the new

madness that you can even accept *pity* at a woman's hands! Where's your spirit and your pride? I am ashamed of you in your new character."

He stood, still smiling, yet scornful, superbly handsome, and yet as cold as the statue of the Apollo that he resembled. He positively drove her wild by his indifference and merriment.

"For Heaven's sake don't madden me, Max!" she cried, clasping her hands, "I suffer horribly—*horribly*! I cannot bear to think that any other woman is growing nearer to your heart than I am, and here, too, right before my eyes; go away, I beg of you, spare me the cruel anguish, the utter—utter misery of knowing and feeling that you love another! If you don't, I swear I cannot answer for myself, for any wretched *esclandre* I may make; and besides, I shall be revenged on you—on *her*. The whole world shall know that your notions of man-

liness and honour are to play fast and loose with women, to win, and deceive, and betray. Miss Heathcote shall not care for you, marry you perhaps in ignorance of what you really are ; how bitterly you reward affection, how lightly you can cast it off when your fancy is caught elsewhere."

Max listened to it all, startled a little it must be confessed ; and the thought uppermost in his mind, which caused him most anxiety, was whether this woman, in her uncurbed nature and uncurbed speech, would succeed in awaking a coldness between him and Quita.

" Play fast and loose, win, deceive, and betray—strong words indeed, Miss Rothes ; but I cannot for the life of me see how such terms are at all applicable in our case. You have shown a curious indifference to wounding my feelings, my pride, but far be it from me to recriminate or to try and hurt your self-respect ; still, in common

justice to myself, I must assert that nothing—yes, *nothing* in our past, that *I* have said or done, or even thought, prevents my being a free man, to love and marry whom I please.”

She stood as if riveted to the ground. Her heart beat very fast, and her hands clenched together nervously. She quite realised in that moment that he was drifting away—*had* drifted away, in fact, already—farther than he had ever done before. In that supreme moment of agony and despairing love, her feelings for him lifted her entirely out of herself. She was natural; and natural, she was tenfold lovelier.

Max was a born artist, and his artistic eye was caught at once by the increased and glowing beauty before him.

He absolutely gazed at her with profound admiration!

And, looking up, she caught that look.

It was enough. She would not, she could not, let him slip right away from her grasp. What was womanly delicacy, or dignity, or reticence, to her in comparison to the vehement love, that thrilled her veins and made her heart beat to suffocation?

“Max!”

She uttered the name betwixt a whisper and a hiss, between her set teeth, with her glowing face close to his, and her eyes burning into his own.

“You don’t know what women suffer when their life is turning to ashes; when their soul is torn in twain; when jealousy, like ten thousand devils, pulls at their heart strings! I love you, Max! dear Max! I love you better, far better than my life! I would give up anything, everything—position and wealth, and all that women covet in this world for you! and bereft of them would believe myself in Paradise any-

where by your side! Think, Max, we are both free yet; you have not pledged yourself to any other woman. I am fettered only by a few words, that I can recall without a sigh and forget with gladness. Max! oh Max! it is for you to decide! Do you remember Rome? Is yesterday to-day with you? Fate has left us still in freedom. Say, I beseech of you, for the love of Heaven, shall we cast away our last hope of happiness?"

A dark red tide swept over his cheek, and he bit his lips while he strode forward and caught her hands.

"Tell me what you mean," he asked almost roughly, "I am dull at reading riddles; and *you* are a riddle beyond my understanding. Have you come here to-day to tell me that you are willing to break your faith with Erroll Adair, to sacrifice wealth and position for my sake?"

She staggered slightly with agitation as

he spoke, a wild joy flashed from her black eyes, and she bent forward until her face nearly touched his.

"What is it?" she gasped; "it cannot, *cannot* be that you love *me*, Max, that you will accept my sacrifice."

"No; I only wanted to know what women are made of, how coolly they cast off love, how lightly they perjure themselves;" he answered, tossing her hands away, and drawing himself from her, "but, as I said before, there are women and *women*."

She started, and looked at him keenly for an instant.

"I see," she muttered in a low, hoarse voice, "you were only feeding your vanity, you were only probing my heart to mock at the wound you had made in it. So be it—we two will part; I to marry Erroll Adair, you to win Miss Heathcote, if you can, but——"

She would not let him go without one parting shot, a little warning that might stay him yet.

“If you marry that girl, your whole life will be spoilt. Mark my words! She does not love you. She will never give you such love as I have done.”

“Thank God for that!” Max said, almost aloud, as he watched her walk rapidly away.





CHAPTER II.

“IF HE BUT LOVED ME!”

“Such fate ere long will thee betide,
When thou hast handled been a while,
Like faded flowers be thrown aside.”

UP to this date, Queenscourt—since the death of old Mr. Adair—had not been much given to entertainments; but since Erroll’s engagement to Miss Rothés, things were materially changed, and there were indications of company everywhere—upstairs, downstairs, and in my lady’s chamber.

The blue room and the gold room were in apple-pie order. The salon suite of rich apricot brocade, stripped of its frills

and furbelows, displayed its legs and arms like a *coryphée*; and breakfasts, luncheons, and dinners, were the order of the day.

The Beauty loved society and adulation and feverish excitement, as dearly as she loved herself; and Erroll, who was still her devoted slave, seemed to have no other aim in life but to minister to her pleasures and caprices.

She was curiously *distracte*, however, as, her toilette fully complete and her *femme de chambre* dismissed, she sat down in an easy-chair in her own room, unmindful of her laces and silks, preparatory to descending to a dinner-party to which Max Vereker had accepted an invitation, at the pressing solicitation of Mrs. Adair.

The strong light of a couple of lamps fell full upon her as she sat, making the ivory whiteness of her skin, the exquisite tints of her cheeks and lips, and her brilliant starry eyes, absolutely dazzling.

The strongest glare could only show up her brilliance, but could not detect a flaw or blemish in the marvellous colouring, that, to do her justice, was indebted solely to nature's handiwork.

No art, in fact, could have lent her a charm which she did not already possess, and no *demi-jour* light was needed for the enhancing of a beauty that was simply perfect, as though she had been in the first bloom of youth.

But all that Elise's talent could do for her had been done, and on that especial evening she had devoted hours to the most trifling details, so as to lose no point by which "that girl" would suffer in the eyes of Max.

Abandoning her usual preference for startling gleams of colour and heavy costly material, she had decided to wear pure white. White would at any rate make her look young; and her trailing skirts fell in

misty cloud-like masses around her, while a string of lovely Oriental pearls (some of the Adair family jewels) shone among the laces on her bosom, and a fellow string of the same pure gems gleamed through her ruddy hair; and with the air of a born empress, she walked in a slow and stately fashion into the big room, where most of the guests were already assembled.

The sight of Max, in earnest conversation with Quita, rather unnerved her; but, calling up all her worldliness to the fore, she controlled the flash in her eyes, and crushing down the bitterness she felt into her heart, she gave him a smiling recognition.

They had scarcely met since that walk after luncheon, where she had bitterly awakened to his new-born fancy for Quita. And she had had no opportunity of speaking to him alone since the time when she had offered herself to him and been—rejected!

“Vereker will take you in, my darling,” whispered Erroll. “He is really such a nice clever fellow, that you *must* cultivate him.”

With her heart beating faster, she nodded a gracious assent, and in another moment her arm was linked in Max’s.

It was intense gratification to her to separate him from Quita, even for the period of dinner.

Queenscourt did everything, of course, *en grand*, and all the arrangements were palatial. On the long table stood magnificent *épergnes* heaped over with the rarest orchids, while baskets of hothouse pines and peaches and luscious amber and purple grapes stood amidst gold and silver and crystal, and the whole was brilliantly lit up with a fairy splendour. The feast was epicurean too. The meats had lost their identity in the elaboration of the flavouring ; cunning *entremets* were

ingeniously introduced, so as to give fresh zest to appetite already satiated; wines of the rarest bouquets abounded; and, above all, fair women-faces leavened the feast.

Miss Rothes glanced over the table, and her eyes sparkled like Washington Irving's toad. It was very pleasant to think that before very long she would own all those rich and costly things before her, and in her complacency she almost forgot Max's proximity for an instant; while she played absently with a magnificent bouquet of gardineas and white azaleas, which by its beauty and fragrance attracted her neighbour's attention.

"An offering from Adair, of course," Max said in a low voice; "how happy you ought to be with the gods showering such good things into your lap; it seems to me that you will turn all the conservatories here into a wilderness."

"Shall I—well, if it is only a few flowers I damage, I shall not be so very much to blame," she answered coldly.

"No, oh no! if you laid whole acres of blossoms waste, what then? All the flowers in Christendom could not possibly form a diadem worthy to crown such a face," Max said gallantly, but with a smile lurking on his handsome mouth. She hated him to smile, for, first of all, it seemed a symptom of a soul at ease, and she did not desire him to be at ease now, when she had gone out of his life; and in the next place, she had an unpleasant suspicion that he laughed at her.

"I love flowers, and I shall have them," she observed sullenly; "they are nicer than anything else in the world."

Max did not know what actuated him to answer her as he did, except a *façon de parler*.

"Are they nicer than—love?"

"Yes."

"But they are not so lasting, you know."

"Lasting!" she echoed, with an uncontrollable sneer. "Love lasting! Good heavens! I do not believe a *man's* love lasts beyond a few hours at the most. It is admiration, flattery—spurious, sickening sentiment. I hate it all."

"How very inscrutable is woman," laughed Max, lightly; in truth, he was not a bit interested in the conversation, and had been trying to catch a glimpse of Quita's brown eyes, of which a lofty vase of stephanotis and maidenhair intercepted the view. "A woman despises the adoration she inspires, and she dislikes the passion she takes such pains to arouse."

"Inscrutable indeed! We may be inconsistent, but women do not seem to me to be paradoxes. We are cold and passionate, selfish and self-denying, tender and heartless, kind and cruel, a mixture of the

serpent and the dove, gentle as a hound to those we love, and—listen well to our last quality, Mr. Vereker—fierce and relentless, ready to work evil *when we hate!*”

“In fact a charming contradiction, which sometimes a man does not care for the trouble of unravelling,” answered Max, filling her glass and his own with Cliquot; “let us two drink to peace, Miss Rothés. Long may it last.”

She pushed her glass impatiently away, without sipping, while a dark cloud gathered on her fair forehead and her big dusky eyes scintillated and flashed.

“Be careful,” advised Max, in a low voice; “Adair is watching you. I never saw a man more hopelessly in love.”

“Yes,” she replied contemptuously with a curl of her lips; “but I wonder when men who are in love will learn not to show it. They will never understand that the

prize beyond our reach is the one we covet. It has been so since Paradise; it will be so to all eternity I believe."

Her accents grew quite soft and hushed as she spoke, and the blaze of her eyes faded into wistful pathos. Meanwhile Erroll, whose quick ear had caught, even amidst the din of the dinner-table, a chance word here and there, waxed ill at ease.

He had had a lesson about Quentin Vereker; then why had he thrust Max, who was ten times more fascinating than his brother, into Miss Rothes' notice? he wondered; and he cursed himself for a dolt.

Jealous and wayward by nature, it irritated him beyond endurance to see the woman he doted on bestow such close attention upon another man; and he grew absent and silent, wondering whether the love he had obstinately persuaded himself she had for him was nothing but a passing

sentiment—an *amourette* of an hour, to be abandoned directly it lost its piquancy of freshness. Irritation, wounded *amour-propre*, and an incipient jealousy of a new object, were all become merged in the supreme misery of believing that she who had, by dint of coquettish wiles, roused to its centre the purer feelings of his impetuous nature, should set so small a value on the heart she had won that she was both ready and willing to sacrifice it to the gratification of an ephemeral whim, or the transient excitement of a new caprice; for what other feeling could possibly have prompted her to look at and speak to Max Vereker with lips and eyes that too faithfully simulated a love which, of course, she could not really feel for a stranger, and also for a man who was usually grave and reserved to women. The fact was, that in spite of herself, even unconsciously to herself, there was a tenderness in her voice, a lurking

softness in her glance for Max, which came to her at no other time; and Erroll, sick at heart, was glad when the ladies rose, and the sweep of his betrothed's snowy draperies was lost to sight.

On purpose he kept the men long at the Rhenish and Roussillon, and to drown care and wrath, drank deeply enough himself to flush his fair skin and to fire his glance. At a late hour he entered the drawing-room, at the far end of which Miss Rothés lounged lazily on a sofa with a small poodle, that looked like a snowball, in her arms. Max had given her the dog two years before in Rome, and it had been her constant and pampered pet.

"Why on earth do you waste your affection on that little brute?" asked Erroll crossly, approaching and throwing himself down by her side; "you bestow your love where it is not appreciated, Circe."

She raised her eyes slowly, and looked

at him keenly for a moment, as if she were trying to discover any meaning that lurked in his words.

“Do I ?” That is a fate that comes unluckily to most of us, it seems to me !” she answered carelessly ; and then she took to caressing the poodle again.

Erroll bit his nether lip. The wine had excited him, and irritation lent a deeper glow to his face. He looked handsomer than usual, but she never noticed that. Beside Max Vereker, it seemed to her, that all men waxed plain and uninteresting.

“You spoke the truth when I heard you at dinner expatiating to Vereker on love. I think you said that men who showed their affection could not win a woman ; and yet, women are called gentle, loving ! Ye gods ! For cold-blooded cruelty, for passionate devilment, a woman is to a man what a hawk is to a dove, a tiger to a tame cat !”

Miss Rothes shrugged her lovely white

shoulders, that gleamed under the light like marble, and she laughed.

"Hark to him, Cara!" she said to her dog; "this is the way a fine young country gentleman makes love. Is he not polite? Is he not courteous and complimentary?"

Erroll ground his teeth to suppress the impatient words that burned on his lips.

"Circe, what on earth possesses you sometimes? Is your vanity greater than any other feeling you own? Can the naturally contemptible *rôle* of coquette have any attraction for you? Tell me, *why* do you treat me like this?"

She glanced towards a large dimly-lighted conservatory, in which three or four men were smoking, with a rich background of flowers and foliage, and her eyes rested dreamily on one figure—the figure of Max Vereker.

The light of a shaded lamp fell on his head, touching his fair hair with a mellow

glow. His deep blue eyes looked out gravely and absently, and his mouth was set and even a little stern.

Assuredly he looked no carpet knight; yet to her thinking he had no compeer in his sex.

"Why don't you go and smoke?" she asked indifferently of Erroll. "I wish I was a man, that I might smoke. Abroad one can, but in prudish narrow-minded England it would be dreadfully *outré*, horribly *bizarre*, I suppose. *Dieu!* How Adair *mère* would be shocked, and that straitlaced young person, Miss Heathcote, who, by-the-way, has taken to flirting lately, and with Mr. Vereker, too, the very last man for that sort of thing."

"How do you know?" questioned Erroll suspiciously. "I thought you told me you had only met him once or twice in Rome, and knew nothing of him!"

"No more I do; but, *mon cher*, I am

a wonderful reader of physiognomy. Now in Mr. Vereker's face there are certain indications of strength, and a superiority to most follies, that tell me Miss Heathcote is wasting her youth and beauty. But to return to our sheeps—as the French say. With one tiny cigarette one can be unconscious of everything; living in cloudland, one can be deaf and dumb and blind to this weary, wicked world; one little *sultan doux* is such a panacea for ill."

"Pshaw!" muttered Erroll, vexed at her affected tone, and the insincerity that rang in her sentiments. "If such things are your ambition—a life begun in the obscurity of cloudland, and ending in smoke—I think it's likely to be realised, that is, if you persist in going on as you are doing."

His attempt at sarcasm railed her, and a savage gleam shot from her eyes; but it quickly died away, and she returned to her lazy, careless tone.

“*Nous verrons*, but please don't try and tell my fortune. I like the future to be a mystery. Who knows but that it may be something better than the present? Good gracious, Erroll, what a thing life is! What miserable creatures we are! We dream of grand things, and awake to—nothing; we hope for all sorts of happiness, and suffer but sorrow; we sow in joy, and reap in tears.”

Erroll turned and stared at her in astonishment. With all her eccentricity and variableness of mood, she was not given to moralising; but she looked so supremely lovely, that he softened in spite of him.

“Why should life be anything but sunshine to you, my darling? You know that I love you! that I worship you with all my heart and soul; that I long to surround you with every luxury money can bring; that you have only to speak, to have every desire fulfilled. And, Circe——”

He looked at her tenderly, his eyes dwelling fervently on her, his voice falling almost to a whisper.

"I thought you loved me in return!"

So humbly, so wistfully he said it; his soul literally hungering for a warm response.

Miss Roth's answer was a merry, careless laugh. It was her nature, lovely, fickle butterfly as she was, to change her mood almost as often as she spoke. That is, to all other men, save Max.

With him, she was timid, more womanly, thinking less of herself than of him.

And with such a feeling in her breast, a woman, even a bad one, rises above her own level for the time being. With Erroll she was careless of wounding, hard at the core, her words were false, her kisses a snare and a delusion, her life a living lie.

"Come, laugh with me, little Cara," she said, addressing her white poodle; "isn't

my *fiancé* funny! As if there was any doubt that I loved him; as if any woman with eyes in her head could help loving such a handsome fine gentleman; as if anyone could resist his *beaux yeux* and the *beaux yeux de sa casette*, and his long long line of ancestors that came with William the Conqueror. We both love him dearly, don't we, *Cara mia*? because he is never bad tempered nor jealous, and makes us so happy always!"

With an angry gesture and a muttered execration Erroll jumped up from his seat, and, turning on his heel, walked towards the other end of the room, where his mother, in her black velvet and diamonds, sat looking so fair, and placid, and good; and such a contrast to his future wife.

Close to Mrs. Adair Quita bent over a folio of drawings, and by her Erroll paused a moment.

"So I hear you have developed a talent for flirting," he said curtly.

"With whom?" she asked, but her eyes fell under his and she blushed.

Erroll frowned.

"What false creatures you women are. I begin to believe in none of you," he said angrily, as he passed on.

Meanwhile, oblivious of his existence, Miss Rothel watched Max with half-closed eyes.

"If *he* but loved me!" she murmured. "Oh, if *he* would only love me I should be a better woman!"

Max caught her glance, and fearful lest her influence should militate against his dawning love for Quita, he went up and took the seat Erroll had vacated by her side.

He wanted to propitiate her.

Her long lazy eyes flashed with pleasure,

and a deep pink flush like a wild rose crept to her cheek.

"Tell me," he said, "are we to be friends again?"

"*Friends?*" she asked meaningly.

"Yes, *friends!* You know that fates are against us being nearer or dearer. And, besides, Adair is my old schoolfellow; I would not bring him unhappiness for the world."

"How good you are *to him*. Do you ever think that love being a rare article in the world's market, it should not be despised, rejected, as though it were valueless?"

"I have never despised any kindly feeling shown to me," he answered gently. "My life, God knows, has not been such a bright or prosperous one that I could afford to disdain a proffered hand or friendly word, but it is that very life of mine that would make me refuse a proffered

heart, since I would not dare drag down to my unenviable lot any woman whom nature has fitted for a higher and brighter fate."

"Supposing the woman preferred to share your lot to a monarch's crown—according to Pauline Deschappelles?"

"Still more would I deem it my duty to keep her from making such a miserable sacrifice!"

"Not if *you* loved her! Oh, Max, I wonder if you *can* love?"

His eyes wandered unconsciously to where Quita was sitting, pale and silent, with Clifford of Allington murmuring soft nothings into her unwilling ear.

"I think I can!" replied Max dreamily. And Miss Rothes, who had been afraid to raise her eyes, lest they should betray her to others, not having seen his wandering glance, took the answer to herself.

"If we were but back once more in that

studio at Rome, I would make you love *me*, Max!" she whispered. And, as her warm breath swept over him, he felt for an instant the sensuous delirium of a dream. Although no spark of love possessed him, he seemed enthralled, intoxicated by the spell of her beauty. And as her hand lingered in his at parting, Max thought how fatal the woman's influence would be on a man who really loved her. How his wealth and life and honour—ay, even his soul would be yielded up, if she willed it.

Ten minutes afterwards he turned from her to say "Good-night" to Quita; and as his gaze rested on the small white face, he gave a short sigh of relief. It seemed to him as if a strong tension on his nerves gave way. It was like going out of the hot scorching midsummer sunshine into the cool, fragrant, misty, poetical moonlight.

"I have seen nothing of you this evening," he said to Quita.

"Nothing," she answered gently.

And Max, looking down into the brown limpid eyes, read something that sent him home with a light heart.

There was a little disappointment and a shade of regret down in those sweet brown depths, and Lavater himself must have been a terrible impostor indeed if guile or any *arrière pensée* could have existed with that frank brow, that face open as the day.

Max strolled home under the starlight in a dream. Already he knew

Two separate worlds—the one, that small
Beloved and consecrated spot
Where *Quita* was ; the other, all
The dull wide waste where she was not.

"I'll ask you to marry me, my darling !
to share my life with all its miseries, and
only love to lighten the burden. Like
Montrose, I'll put it to the touch to
win or lose it all. And, if I lose, I'll go
away ; but I will never forget you and the

few hours of sunshine you have brought me," Max said to himself before he fell asleep that night; and it was not Miss Rothes' glowing beauty that haunted his dreams, but a Madonna face, pure as a lily.





CHAPTER III.

PITY IS AKIN TO LOVE.

“Go to! Joy is of work the pay,
And poor men’s wives are true as they
That grace a gilded luxury.”

“THEY have known each other before—
and *well*,” Quita murmured to herself, as
she went, it must be owned, somewhat
listlessly up the stairs when the dinner
guests were gone; and there was an in-
definable sensation of disappointment in
her mind which she did not even try and
analyse herself. She had, unseen herself,
watched the Beauty strolling past the
wood with Max some days before; and

Miss Rothés' manner to him that evening had struck her as suspicious and strange.

It was close upon midnight, but somehow slumber was gone from her eyelids, so she threw herself down in her little green-and-white sanctum "to think."

She looked very sweet, half-lying there, with her long chestnut hair, all loosened from its comb, streaming over her snow-white shoulders, and with one bare dimpled arm supporting her head, as she indulged in her reverie, which, after all, was a reverie of incipient love, though she would not have acknowledged the fact for the world.

By-and-by she took a photograph from the table and looked at it long and earnestly; it was a likeness of Max Vereker that she had taken surreptitiously out of an old album of Mrs. Adair's that very morning.

"It is like him even now," she said half aloud; "it has the same features—though the joyous look in the blue eyes is gone, poor fellow."

She thought she was not in love with Max, if by love was meant the feeling she had had for Erroll, a feeling which she felt would live to a certain extent, as long as she lived herself; and she was right, for a woman never quite gets over her first love, and certainly she never forgets him. But as has been said before, Quita was *désillusionnée* with her hero, for few women can stand the ignominious spectacle of the man they have raised on the apex of a pedestal to admire, revere, and worship, being converted by another woman into a contemptible football, which she can knock about ruthlessly, and kick at will.

Of course there could be but one Erroll Adair in all the world to her; but that

Erroll was gone ; he had lost his individuality, in fact, when he grew into a slave and a plaything for Miss Rothés.

Putting her photograph carefully by, she went to bed and dreamt that she was stranded on a desert isle ; while, from an opposite shore, Miss Rothés, supported on either side by Erroll and Max, mocked at her suffering and her hapless fate.

Unrefreshed by her slumbers, she went down pale and silent to breakfast, and thanked the fates for having kept both Mr. Adair and Erroll from the meal. She felt dreary and irritable and unsociable, and quite unfit for anything. So, after wandering about the house aimlessly like a little white ghost, she put on her hat and sauntered into the grounds.

On she went, heedless of the direction she took. The sunshine and the flowers might do her good, she thought ; and anyway, she

longed to be out of the hearing and sight of the old home that had grown painful to her, and finally, hot and flushed, she sat down on a deliciously cool mossy knoll under a big arching tree.

In the foliage above her scarcely a twig stirred; the wind, albeit balmy with fragrance, came very faint and slow, in little gentle whispers that sounded like magic melody to the girl's imaginative temperament. Beneath the brightness of the sky, odours like incense to the God of light went up from tangled heaps of blossom; and shadow was literally nowhere, save in the little green nook she had taken shelter in.

It was all so peaceful and so still, it was such a lovely, smiling world after all; that, with a half smile of content, Quita shut her eyes, and leant back against the trunk of the old oak tree. And when she opened them again, it

was to see Max Vereker standing beside her.

His gaze was fixed on her face; and, as she suddenly met his eyes, she reddened as deep as a rose at what that gaze said.

He bent and took her hand.

"Are you glad to see me?" he asked softly.

"Yes! but what will they say?" she answered shyly.

"Who?" he questioned, without removing the regard under which her own lids fell.

"Miss Rothes! or, Erroll!"

"*Après?*" he said quietly.

She did not know what to answer. The man's deep blue eyes had a subtle influence on her, and in his presence she lost all glibness of speech. It was a pleasant influence too, putting her into a sweet dreamy feeling that was infinitely soothing and restful after the last month or two of unhappiness she

had known. But when he said "*Après?*" her heart beat a little faster, and she felt angry with herself for being a little fool in his sight.

"Tell me, are we never to meet because *they* may think it strange?" he asked, in a low voice.

By this time he had seated himself on the mossy knoll, and her white fingers were clasped in his, while his long moustache swept down in rather dangerous proximity to her cheek.

"No," she said quickly, "I hope not that. I should be awfully sorry if there was an end to the pleasant time we have passed together; yet if they think we meet *not* by chance, you know, they will say that——"

"I am dishonourable!" he interrupted. "They will call me more cruel names than they do even now, and will try and raise a barrier between us. I shall have to

work very hard before my herculean task is accomplished, and I am in a fit position to——”

He stopped suddenly, and she glanced at him inquiringly. Was it right for a comparative pauper—a man with a stain on him—to talk to her of what he felt for her? And yet those feelings of his were a thousand times stronger than himself.

Max looked at her so yearningly and earnestly that, to hide the flush that rose on her face, she averted it a little, and, ruthlessly dragging up a handful of spiked blades of grass, she sent them flying through the air. A big vicious-looking bee, with brown filmy wings, came and settled down on a wild flower near them. Then it buzzed away again. A few feathery cloudlets floated athwart the great sapphire plains of sky—and the two were alone—entirely alone; with only the trees,

and the wild flowers, and the sunshine keeping them company.

Suddenly Max seized both her hands in his grasp, and his blue eyes seemed to darken into black, so intense was his gaze on the sweet face—a snowflake of a face, as Erroll had been wont to call it in earlier days, before his Delilah's more matured and *bizarre* charms altered his taste from the pure to the florid.

"Mariquita was my dead mother's name, and I love it; may I call you Quita just when we are quite alone?" Max asked almost humbly.

She bowed her head in assent, but her tongue seemed tied.

"And will you call me Max? *Do*, and then I shall think that you won't let me drift right out of your memory, a homeless, friendless devil as I am when I leave this."

"I shall *never* forget you, Max!" she

said quite simply, looking up at him with great pitiful eyes. There was no blush or agitation on her face, only the infinite truth and candour that one sees on the face of a child. She was so dreadfully sorry for him !

“Ah !” he whispered, almost fiercely, “you must not speak to me like that. I am unused to sincerity and kindness now, and it unmans me quite. Besides! help me to control myself, help me to keep a lock on my lips, lest they should tell you all that is within my soul.”

What could she say ? She had none of the hardihood of Miss Rothes ; still, in spite of her, the little hand that lay in his gave an almost imperceptible pressure.

Max felt it go through him like an electric shock, that sent his blood rushing through his veins, and his pulses throbbing hard.

“Darling, my darling ! I *must* tell you after all. I *must* tell you—only once—only

once ! that I love you with all my heart—that I would strive every nerve to make you love me, and, loving me thus, to be mine, my very own, in poverty and work perhaps, but still mine, to have and to hold till death us do part ! Yet, how dare I ask you to share such a lot ? How can I be such a selfish wretch as to wish to drag you down from wealth and luxury to become—my wife ?”

He turned very white as she spoke, and a great shadow crept over his eyes.

True, she did not love him. That is, she did not love him as she had loved Erroll Adair. That had been a mad phantasy possessing her heart and brain, but she knew that if she married Max she would make him a good and true wife.

She was *sure* that in deed, and word, and even thought, she would be faithful and loyal to this man always. The fitful

pink colour came and went on her cheek, the big brown eyes were hidden by their great broad white lids, but a smile, a little ghost of a smile, hovered round her pretty red lips.

"I do not care for wealth and luxury," she said, almost under her breath.

Max started, and his face grew radiant, like that of a man awaking suddenly to joy from a hideous dream.

"Quita!" he cried breathlessly.

"Are riches the only thing in life?" she asked, with childlike frankness. "I know——"

"What?" he questioned feverishly, "is it that you care for me, that you are willing to marry me in spite of all—all?"

And, bending forward, he put his hand under the rounded chin and lifted up the little drooping face towards him. The eyes were still downcast, but he managed to

guess at their language, and he saw the lips part in something between a quiver and a shy laugh.

"Is it so—say?" he whispered passionately, throwing his arm round her, and drawing her nearer, until her face rested against his. "Say, for God's sake, is it so? Ah, don't, don't take away my new-born hope; but tell me that you love me—that you will promise to be my own?"

"I promise."

The two little words were not very coherent, but nevertheless Max heard them. And a light flashed over his features, making him as handsome as a god.

"Love! love! put your dear arms round my neck, as you did once long ago," he cried, "if it's only for the sake of auld lang syne!"

And Quita obeyed, but with her hot flushed face hidden against him.

Max clasped her to his heart.

“Look at me, my darling! my life!”

She looked up, and in those soft brown shadows he read honesty and truth untold. The next instant he stooped and pressed his first kiss on her lips.

Quita started away from him then, and, for a second, she stood before him, white, and scared, and trembling.

That kiss had sent the blood back from her cheeks to her heart, which throbbed with a wildness and a pain that made her faint unto death. Then the rose colour crept slowly back, and of that passionate but pure kiss that Max had laid on her mouth, there was born a true affection for him.

And thus it was that he won his wife.

But Max knew nothing of her past, for the past belonged to Erroll, though the present and the future were Max Vereker's.

He saw her start, and took her gently in his arms, as a mother takes her child.

“My mad love startled you, my little one! mine, indeed, since you care for me. Ah! Quita, I mean to claim you to-morrow, for my wife. They will blame me, scout me, perhaps; but *you*, you will still come to me, won't you? You will swear to me that no one, either man or woman, shall divide us two?”

“No one, Max,” she answered gravely and deliberately. And even in that hour she wondered if he was thinking of Miss Rothés.

“Mine, then, for better, for worse, for always, until death!” And Max, lifting his hat, looked upwards reverently, as if he were mutely imploring a blessing from heaven on his troth plight.



CHAPTER IV.

FOR CONSCIENCE' SAKE.

“ Oh, how the spring of love resembleth
The uncertain glory of an April day,
Which now shows all the beauty of the sun,
And by-and-by a cloud takes all away.”

AFTER one little kiss of the hand to Max, Quita ran home hurriedly. She felt as if she were pursued by an avenging spirit.

Once back in her own room at Queens-court, she flung down her hat and parasol, and, sinking on the sofa, burst into a great torrent of tears ; a curious sense of having done something criminal haunted her, a feeling of reproach for unloyalty to Erroll,

the first great love of her life, rose up in her mind.

And though, with burning cheeks and heart, she confessed to herself that if Erroll had not proved himself fickle as the wind, even Max would have gone to the wall, yet she did not repent what she had done.

It was the best thing to do, the best mode of thrusting the past away. She had pledged herself to Max in fact, *for conscience' sake*.

Conscience told her a lingering love for Erroll would soon be a crime, and to drive away every remnant of that love, she was going to be Max Vereker's wife.

"Poor Max !"

This was how she thought of her future husband ; of the man who, after she had left him, went down on his knees on the grassy knoll, and thanked God for the happiness that had come into his life !

Growing calmer, Quita dried her tears,

and smoothed her hair, and crept like a guilty thing down the stairs to the first floor, where Mrs. Adair's room was situated.

Rapping quietly, she entered.

Mrs. Adair was sitting in an easy-chair, near the window, absorbed in a little book of devotions; but she looked up and noticed the girl's flushed cheeks and excited demeanour at once.

"You are not well, Quita! Where have you been, child? Roberts told me there was scarlatina in the village!"

For answer, Quita sat down by her feet, and bowing her face on Mrs. Adair's knee, burst into another storm of tears.

"Dear!" she cried amidst her sobs, "forgive me, I have been very wrong and deceitful; I ought to have told you long ago, that—that——"

Mrs. Adair passed her hand softly over the ruffled chestnut hair. "What is it, has Circe——"

She paused. She knew that Miss Rothés was antagonistic to Quita, but she had resolved to notice none of the short-comings, and their name was legion, of her son's bride elect.

The name Circe called up a whole array of feelings, numbering pride and courage, to Quita's aid.

"I have deceived you in not telling you before that——"

The words would not come it seemed, something seemed to choke them back.

"Don't be afraid to tell me anything," Mrs. Adair said kindly.

Quita lifted up her eyes, and somehow, in spite of her weeping, they wore a look of greater content than they had worn for weeks. Her voice was grave, and there was no blush on her cheek.

"I have been meeting Max Vereker very often," she said quietly. "Not by accident I am afraid! I know it was

against the *convenances*; but I feared to tell you, lest you might betray me to—*to her*. *She* says such cruel contemptuous things of him, that I could not bear it!”

She, Mrs. Adair divined at once, was Miss *Roths*, but she was silent and amazed; it had never entered her philosophy that *Quita* and *Max* had got so far as meeting—and not by accident.

She liked *Max* considerably, and she respected him. She believed fully in his legitimacy, and she could quite understand a girl feeling a romantic, tender, poetical attachment to the man with a sad story attached to him; but anything practical in the way of courtship had never entered her head.

Quita looked at her wistfully.

“You don’t think, auntie, that anyone will try and put obstacles in the way of my marrying *Max Vereker*?”

The tone of the question was slow and

deliberate, and even startling in its extreme quietude.

“Marrying Max Vereker, child? What nonsense! you cannot seriously be thinking of such a thing. You have acted very wrongly in meeting him; but no one shall know it if you will be more discreet in future.”

“I promise I will not see him again, without your consent; but auntie, you will not tell anyone—that is Miss Rothes, about us.”

“Why Circe especially?”

“It is not my secret,” she answered, “but I will tell you, for I do not understand it myself. Miss Rothes went out one day after luncheon to Stephen King’s cottage down by the Western Copse, and I saw her walking a long time with Mr. Vereker, and yet she professes to hate him and is always running him down before me.”

"Max walked and talked a long time with Circe, you say," and Mrs. Adair reflected. "Have a care, Quita; Circe is very lovely and she is a dangerous woman for a man's companionship. Men are deceivers, ever! Take warning by what you have heard. It was very wrong indeed of Max to have walked and talked with my son's promised wife, and I did not believe he was wanting in honour!"

And Mrs. Adair flushed up wrathfully.

"Blame Miss Rothes if you will! it was *her* doing. I have seen Mr. Vereker try to avoid her; but she will not be avoided. Don't say a word against Max, for my sake, auntie! I could stake my life that he is all that is good, and noble, and honourable—and—and—*I love him dearly!*"

"Confessions are good for the soul, little one," said Erroll's voice. He had stolen

in upon the *tête-à-tête*, suddenly and noiselessly.

Both women started perceptibly, and a hot, vivid colour rushed over the younger woman's face.

She felt as if she could willingly sink through the floor. Erroll's voice had not yet lost its charm or its influence on Max Vereker's plighted wife. Nor could she apparently bear his touch with calmness or indifference; for Quita shrank away with a little shiver, as her cousin's hand fell caressingly on her hair.

"Secrets in the prison-house, *madre mia*," he said laughingly, and a little consciously. For he firmly believed that the girl had been relieving her pent-up feelings of love, by speaking of him. "But, unfortunately, I did not hear much of them; I came a little too late. Who is it that rejoices in the treasure of this child's heart?"

"Max Vereker," answered Mrs. Adair.

"*Max Vereker!*" repeated Erroll in profound amazement.

There was a dead silence in the room. One or two twigs of the parasites knocked against the window-frame, and a favourite macaw of Mrs. Adair's cried out, "Quita ! poor Quita !"

Then Erroll walked up to the end of the room, where Quita had taken refuge, and catching her cold hands in a grasp, that held her like a vice, he pulled her round towards the light.

Her heart throbbed so fast that it pained, and her little face was white and scared, as though she had seen a ghost. And so she had. The ghost of her love for Erroll had appeared to her in that minute, upbraiding her for forgetfulness.

"So you *love* Max Vereker?" asked Erroll in a low concentrated voice that was almost a whisper.

She looked up in his face. It was set and stern, and there was a cold light in his eyes, which she had never seen before.

But the very misery she endured in meeting that glance brought her resolution.

"I love Max Vereker," she answered, in a voice as low and clear and distinct as a silver bell.

"Does he love *you*?"

"Yes!"

"Do you know that he is poor and homeless; that he is—*nobody*!"

She bent her head.

"Speak!" he ordered peremptorily.

"I know it all."

"And knowing all, are you going to marry him?"

"Yes!"

"All right! I'll give you away!" replied Erroll in a hard ringing voice. And he tossed her hands away from him roughly.

And Quita went back to her room, with a sharp pang at her heart.

“I am glad I have done it, for conscience’ sake!” she faltered.





CHAPTER V.

MAN AND WIFE.

“Lo ! here I prophesy :

Sorrow on love hereafter shall attend,

It shall be waited on by jealousy,

Find sweet beginning, but unsavoury end.”

ERROLL kept his word, and gave her away with a smile on his lips and a cold light in his eyes ; but Miss Rothés, on pretence of illness, avoided her office of bridesmaid.

And the knot tied, the newly-wedded pair went away quietly, without any fuss

or pomp, to a quaint little sea-side place : he to rejoice daily and hourly on the bliss he had won ; she to strive for oblivion, and to learn to love.

“I have neither Johnstone’s bower nor Huntingtower to offer you, my darling,” Max said wistfully, as sitting side-by-side on the shining sands, with the purple waves murmuring in their ears, he looked at his wife’s face and believed that no other could be so fair. “You have wedded yourself to a hard struggle for name and fame, wealth and position, even for bread ! Does it frighten you—the prospect—my own ?”

She shook her head and smiled.

Somehow it did not seem very difficult to be happy anywhere with Max.

The midsummer sun shone down on the environs of Surbiton, and this was the pretty domestic picture its rays lit up.

A cottage, with slanting roof and broad latticed windows, and whitewashed walls, gleaming through tangled masses of woodbine and scented tea-roses, a narrow, gravelled path, leading up straight from the little green gate, with nodding grass and glowing flowers, nestling close together on either side, and a few big shady trees as a background to the whole ; the tiny domain enclosed by a low stone wall, and over the wall, under the shadow of a tall laburnum, whose falling petals formed a carpet of golden tissue for her feet—the leaning figure of a girl.

A girl with great brown eyes, and a profile like a cameo ; with Hebe's face and Aphrodite's form. Her straw hat hung on a neighbouring branch, and her rich chestnut hair tossed back carelessly with an impetuous movement, displayed a candid, intelligent brow, and a pair of soft red lips,

slightly apart, as with upturned face she intently watched the fleecy clouds chasing one another through the blue sky, and listened to the singing of the birds hard by.

"Life is not half bad, after all," she said aloud, and she broke off two big clusters of yellow blossom from her canopy, and placed one in her bosom and one in her hair with a little gesture of coquetry. "I wonder if Max likes laburnum?"

"Max likes everything his pretty one wears," a voice whispered close to her, while a strong arm went round her waist.

She gave a little laugh, and lifted up her mouth for a kiss.

It was very pleasant to feel that that arm was hers for ever and ever.

Quita watched eagerly the progress of his "Hermia," for which he was to be paid two hundred pounds; an enormous sum,

which was not only to keep them for a very long time in the necessaries of life, but to help pay their way across the sea in search of proof of Max's legitimacy.

"Hermia" was a nymph of delicious beauty, lying in a sort of trance that resembled death, with desolation on her features, and her two slender hands crossed meekly on her breast; and, though Max did not know it, his fingers had unconsciously caught his wife's face as his work went on, and the likeness to Quita at last became striking.

But "Hermia" was not the only subject in which her features were reproduced with a fidelity that only a loving touch could have wrought. Sweeter phrases fell from Max's lips than strokes from his skilful brush, and always, in spite of himself, "Ophelia," "Evangeline," "Louise de la Vallière," "Diane de Poitiers," and many

another beside, owned Quita's face for theirs.

"I cannot surely be like that, Max," she would say to him, stealing on tiptoe and peeping in delighted admiration and astonishment at the glowing image of loveliness depicted on the canvas.

"Yes ; only ten thousand times lovelier," he would answer in impassioned accents ; and then he would take her by the arm and place her full face, profile, gazing upwards like a devotee or bending lowly as a Magdalen. She was a mine of wealth to him for years to come, he would say. But one day he threw down his palette and turned very white, and Quita, startled, gazed at him in dismay.

"What is it, Max ?" she cried.

"Nothing, my child ; only I was thinking what a fool I had been ! I, who am jealous of the very air that plays on your head,

have copied your face for other men's eyes to look on! Oh, little one, jealousy is a horrible feeling!"

"Oh, Max!" she said, putting her hand on his lips; "please don't talk of jealousy even. It is a fearful thing, and spoils many a life!"

He looked up at her quickly and suspiciously.

"Why, what do you know of jealousy?" he asked, a stab going through him as he wondered if she had ever loved and been jealous of any man.

"Oh, I guess it from all I have heard and read, Max," she replied, unable to hide a fleeting blush; "but tell me, what is that blank space you have left just above Hermia's head?" she went on in a feeble attempt to appear unembarrassed.

"For her crown of passion-flowers. I have not sketched them in yet. How well

the glossy leaves and stars of imperial purple would suit these lovely tresses," he said, pressing his lips to them. And Quita, remembering *that* evening at Queenscourt, when Erroll had told her of his engagement to Miss Rothes, and had crowned her with passion-flowers, shivered a little from that kiss and spoke at random.

"*À propos* of jealousy, Max, I had a twinge of it myself the other day, when you were away. I kept asking myself every moment whether you were talking or walking with some pretty woman, and forgetting poor little me."

He looked down a moment, evidently reflecting. Then he raised his eyes, and answered, in a voice that had a *souppçon* of constraint about it :

"You asked yourself whether I forgot you? Oh, Quita! By this time I hoped you knew that you were all the world

to me—that you were life of my life! Besides, I only went because I felt obliged. Cortland has always been very good to me, and I did not like to refuse, especially, as by his aid, I may manage to give my bonnie bird a better gilded cage than this.”

She caught the expression of his eyes, and who could have doubted the strength and sincerity of his love while he looked at her thus.

“We don’t want money to make us happy, Max,” she cried blithely. “I like this cage as much as a gilt one, and I don’t care for any society but yours. But tell me, who did you meet at Bucklands? Anyone I know?”

She asked the question carelessly, and seating herself on a low footstool, leant her head against his knee, so that she looked up into his face.

Max coloured a little in spite of himself.

“There were heaps of people: Lady Walgrave, who is a charming woman, Meredith of the Guards, and Warner, beside ever so many——”

“Was Erroll there, and his—wife, Max?”

The words fell so abruptly, that he coloured again, but she did not notice, and went on without waiting for his reply.

“And, *à propos* of jealousy again, do you know, Max, that I was awfully, awfully jealous of Mrs. Adair—once? I almost thought you had been in love with her in Italy!”

“Pshaw!” ejaculated Max.

“Why, I declare you look quite conscious, Max! You are blushing like a girl,” she cried, sitting upright and scrutinising his features. “Max, I wish to know if Mrs. Adair was at Bucklands!”

“Yes!”

“I suspected so,” she said in a quiet, hurt voice, and she rose from her footstool; but he caught her and pulled her down on his knee.

“My pet, you must not fill your dear little head with silly fancies about me and any other woman. I love *you*, my own. I have never—*never* loved anyone but you in my life; if I had I should be miserable now, for I should not think myself worthy of being the first love of *your* heart.”

It was her turn to redden now; but she passed her arm round his neck, and hid the flickering flush in his curls.

Max clasped her closer, and sat quite silent for a minute or two. It was ineffable happiness to him to hold her thus; to feel that she was really and wholly his for ever and ever.

“Did you ever care for Mrs. Adair, Max?”

“No, my darling!”

“Not a bit? You see she is so very beautiful.”

“Yes; but let me whisper something to you,” and he put his lips to her ear.

“*La beauté sans vertu est une fleur sans parfum!*”

She started.

“Is not Mrs. Adair *good*, Max?”

He shook his head.

“Oh, I am so sorry,” she cried, and the tears sprang up in her eyes for *Erroll's* sake.

Max looked at her fondly, and kissed away the drops.

“Her whole soul is not worth one of these tears,” he said contemptuously, and Quita, listening to the inflection of his voice, grew satisfied.

He had said the truth when he told her business had taken him to Bucklands; though, for many reasons, he had refrained

from mentioning that Mrs. Adair's face was almost the first he had seen on his arrival.

They had met "in the gloaming."

The magnificent drawing-room had lain in shadow here and there, and Mrs. Adair, in a distant recess, stood idly leaning out of a window—evidently preoccupied—for she gave a great start as his voice fell on her ear, though his greeting was conventional enough.

"I hope you are well," was all he said.

"Quite well, thanks," she answered in a hard, metallic voice; and, turning away abruptly, she left him *planté*; and, going over to the other end of the long room, Max heard her talking and laughing with more animation than her wont.

It was the first time she had met him as a *married* man, and her whole soul seemed to rise up in revolt; and she had experienced a sickness unto death as she left

him, though her head had been raised on high, and her step had been imperial.

Max, in spite of himself, felt aggrieved ; if he had been Max Vereker, owner of The Abbey, wealthy and high in social position, the woman's treatment would have aroused more amusement than vexation ; but he was sensitive to a fault, and a snub, even unmeant, drove the blood to his face, and gave a stab to his heart. Leaning against the casement, his thoughts flew back to Quita. After all, she was the comfort and the joy of his life ; and, thinking of the girl he had wooed and won, he forgot all about Mrs. Adair.

A few stragglers kept dropping into the room, and among them, Lady Walgrave, whom he had met in Italy ; but he did not venture near her.

Mrs. Adair's cavalier treatment had somewhat unnerved him ; but Lady Walgrave soon discovered his identity and

rushed up to him with outstretched hands.

“So glad to see you, Mr. Vereker! I did not think you were coming, and it is a charming surprise to me. So it will be to someone else, I know. Circe, have you seen an old friend? Come and let us have a chat about the dear old Roman days.”

Thus bidden, and perhaps really anxious to get once more into Max's proximity, the Beauty marched back to the recess, and took up an artistic *pose* against a tall *prie-dieu* chair.

The faint light from the window slanted down upon her face and figure, the loveliness of which was enhanced by an exquisite toilette of rich white lace, with just a few deep wine-coloured flowers on her bosom. Max glanced at her, but her beauty found no favour in his sight.

"I had the pleasure of standing beside Mrs. Adair for a few moments while she indulged in a day-dream," he remarked carelessly and coldly.

Mrs. Adair fixed her great eyes upon him, with a curious fire burning in their tawny depths.

"He is no fool," she thought to herself; "and he *knows* I am not cured, not even yet. I wonder if he is really as impervious to slight as to love. Love! I believe I *hate* him now."

But she did not. She would have given all she possessed in the world to have known at that moment that Max loved her wholly and solely.

Perchance that knowledge might have made her a better woman, or perchance she might have wearied of her conquest when the first freshness had gone, and her last state have been worse than her first.

Women of her calibre are such paradoxes.

"Mr. Vereker, I want you to enliven the awful period before the dinner gong sounds with one of the delicious *entrainante* little melodies you used to sing to us in Rome. We shall forget our *ennui* listening to you," Lady Walgrave said.

Max hesitated. He was not in a mood for singing. Mrs. Adair's reception had disturbed his equanimity in spite of himself, and he had not quite recovered it.

"Sing one of those Tuscan ariettes," Mrs. Adair murmured softly, unbending from her hauteur.

Max ran his fingers over the keys, and commenced a popular Italian love-ditty, not loudly, but in soft tones, that barely reached the other occupants of the long room.

Lady Walgrave was called away in the midst, and Mrs. Adair, left sole audience, unfurled a huge white fan, and from behind

it let her gaze rest on the face that had more fascination for her than any other face in the world.

Catching her eyes, Max suddenly changed his lively Tuscan song into a tender soft strain.

“Oh, say not woman’s false as fair,
That like the bee she ranges,
Still seeking flowers more sweet and rare,
As fickle fancy changes.

“Ah no ! the love that first can warm
Will leave her bosom never ;
No second passion ere can charm,
She loves—and loves for ever !”

“You have a marvellous *répertoire*,” said his audience quietly ; but her eyes still lingered on his face, and the warmth of her glance denied the coldness of her voice.

“Pardon me,” he murmured, as if starting from a reverie, “what did you say?”

“That you are fond of change in all things.” She flashed hotly.

“Am I? I think if a man’s heart is changeable, a woman’s heart is only a shuttlecock. Is Adair here?”

“No; he is *à l’ordinaire*—tied to his mother’s apron-strings at Queenscourt. I am here at Lady Walgrave’s pressing invitation.”

“And at Cortland’s, of course,” laughed Max, though at the same time he infused a little reproach into his tone. He was by no means a man-flirt—that most despicable object in the world; but somehow he liked to blow hot and cold with this woman, just to torture her. He felt she was so unscrupulous, so removed from all he admired and respected in women.

Mrs. Adair coloured.

“The duke is nothing to me—*nothing*! He never was, as *you* know,” she answered.
“As you are so good as to inquire after my

husband, I will do the polite and ask after your *wife*." And she laid a bitter stress upon the word.

"She is quite well, I thank you," Max said boldly.

"And is she very happy? or has she found out by this time that life is not a bed of roses?"

"She is very happy, I trust!"

"On the principle of your belief that women's hearts are nothing but shuttlecocks, I conclude Mrs. Vereker is happy!"

"What do you mean?" he asked quickly.

"Simply, that if your belief was incorrect, and the words of your song truthful, they were, if I recollect rightly :

Ah, no! the love that first can warm,
Will leave her bosom never :
No *second* passion ere can charm ;
She loves—and loves for ever—

Mrs. Vereker would be the most miserable of her sex!"

"Tell me your meaning," cried Max in a low but impressive whisper, while his face, in the partial light, looked ashy pale, and his deep blue eyes glistened like steel.

She stared him full in the face and laughed! She knew the tables were turned, and she had it in her power to torture him now.

"What a fuss you make about it! It's no secret, or I would not tell you—that Mrs. Vereker was madly in love with her handsome cousin; but my stupid old Erroll had the *mauvais goût* to prefer me to his 'little snowflake,' as he calls her."

He glared almost at her. Was she a woman or a devil he wondered, to say a few foolish words that she knew would raise up strife between man and wife, words that might even blight the promise of a happiness rare in the world.

Max's lips worked nervously, but his regard did not flinch from hers.

“You are joking of course, Mrs. Adair,” he muttered in a hoarse voice that trembled perceptibly; “and if you are joking, pray say so at once, if it’s only for the sake of ‘Auld lang syne.’ ”

Poor diplomat he was; for he could not have hit on a worse mode of persuading her to unsay her cruel words. “Auld lang syne,” in which she had believed he would learn to care for her sooner or later, brought no pleasant or softening recollections to her now, when she knew, with a woman’s keen instinct in such things, that he was wholly another woman’s.

“Even for the sake of olden days, charming as they were,” she answered, with a *souppçon* of irony on her mouth. “I cannot tempt Ananias and Sapphira’s untimely fate to pleasure you. Mrs. Vereker was certainly in love with her cousin; but when she found, no doubt, that all chance of winning him and his fat acres was lost,

she probably thrust the silly fancy from her and taught herself to care for you."

"Ah, God!" murmured poor Max, bending low over the keys to hide his white quivering lips, and the drops that forced themselves to his eyes.

Then suddenly he looked up and caught a triumphant smile that lurked in the corners of her mouth, and that gave him hope.

It seemed to him in that moment that he would willingly yield up half his life to believe her assertion false. It was not, it could not be true what she had said; if it was, Quita had foully deceived him. He had looked into her brown eyes and read truth in them. He could stake his existence that his wife was good and pure and true as gold.

"Max," whispered Mrs. Adair, "listen to me."

He answered nothing, but stood like

an image of stone awaiting her words ; and yet how he thirsted for them ; how he longed to hear that the acute torture he suffered was without a cause. She leant towards him, the perfume from her hair reached him, her warm breath swept over his cheek. To her the proximity had a deadly, dangerous fascination ; she felt dizzy with the overwhelming sensation of being so near him once again. To him the proximity brought no feeling or spell, no more than if she had been a lovely marble figure. The woman, with all her marvellous beauty of red tresses and dusky slumbrous eyes, and a ripe perfection of form, was powerless to make his pulse throb one whit the faster.

“I am sorry I said that about your wife !”

“Sorrow is easily expressed, Mrs. Adair, but contrition cannot eradicate suspicion or jealousy. If my wife was not one of ten

thousand—if she had been a woman like *you*, your innuendoes would have gone a great way towards spoiling my appetite.”

“Let there be an end of sparring and sarcasm between us two, Max; we have known each other too long for it. You judge me harshly, perhaps, and I confess I was wrong to breathe a word about the irrevocable past. I forgot the proverb, ‘What the eye doth not see the heart doth not grieve after;’ but Mrs. Vereker’s old passion for Erroll is not the only thing that makes your marriage unfortunate. There are many other reasons why the event is to be deplored.”

“Really, not to my thinking!” cried Max passionately; “I can boldly assert that my life is a realised dream of Paradise.”

She shivered from head to foot. She hated to hear him say such things, and yet she lowered her long thick lashes lest he should read the effect of his words.

Max watched her keenly, and a smile crossed his lips as he recognised fully that she grudged him his happiness with Quita.

“The only shadow I ever have now is absence from home!” he went on quietly, “and I think I can venture to declare that my wife never has a sigh of regret upon her lips; as for our marriage being unfortunate, I deny it *in toto*. As surely as you and I are face to face, Mrs. Adair, so surely will the day come when I shall regain my rights, and my wife will be mistress of the dear old Abbey!”

She listened to him with her features set and pale. In spite of all, his face, his voice, had their old, old influence, the subtle glamour of the Roman days for her, and she could not harden herself against them.

“Please forgive and forget! I never meant to vex you, I——”

She stopped short as if speech choked her, and he saw actual tears glittering in her lovely eyes, dark as midnight skies, lustrous as twin stars, and soft—at that moment—soft as his wife's.

Looking at them, Max felt his anger lose a portion of its asperity. She was only a woman, and women were weak creatures, whose hearts led them into speaking cruel things, that yet had perhaps no *malice prepense*.

“Circe!”

She started, and he realised the mistake he had made in eschewing the formality that should exist between them, but it was too late. Only once before he had uttered her christian-name, and vividly she remembered the time, while a passionate glow surged over her face, and her eyes burnt fiercely almost into his own.

It was on one sweet soft evening in the Imperial City; the sun dying on its daïs of violet cloud had thrown a few faint flickering golden bars across a room in the Palazzo Nuova; the warm and voluptuous Italian air had stirred laggardly through the shaded room, bringing in its wake the fragrance of oleander and orange-blossom. She had leant against the case-ment, while Max, his fair head thrown back, a glow in his handsome eyes, had sketched the beauty that had dazzled but not captivated him.

“Circe,” he had said unconsciously, as he bade her change the *pose* of her head; and it had sent a thrill right through her frame, while she met his glance, and fancied she read soft love-light in it.

She started now out of the world of sweet memory into a bitter reality as his voice fell on her ear.

“Let us understand one another fully,”

he said calmly and deliberately. "I believe you have a good heart *au fond*, though the world has spoilt it a little by its wisdom. I shall not forget that once I was happy enough to create a kindly interest in that heart. Let me keep that recollection as one of the pleasantest in my not over-fortunate life. I beg of you don't make me, by careless words that can sting cruelly, look back on our past with distaste. Don't turn the feelings I have for you into contempt and dislike."

They were masterful words, and he spoke them with a hauteur better befitting a prince of the royal blood than a Bohemian. And how handsome he looked, Mrs. Adair thought; how infinitely superior to every other man she had known.

"Max," she began in a faltering tone; but Lady Walgrave's return interrupted her.

"I saw you discussing some subject very

warmly with Circe, Mr. Vereker. You were not flirting, I hope ?”

“Why not ?” asked Max lightly, though his heart was heavy.

“Because flirtation is a thing that should be left alone. It always reminds me of a game at patience ; it is such an incomprehensible, wearisome, baffling game, and difficult to get right in the end ; and, as you know, *mon cher*, that of all women, Circe is the worst for such dangerous pastime.”

“I should not attempt it ; but even if I did, Mrs. Adair’s well-known cleverness would soon find a way of making things right in the end.”

“Hem ! I am not so sure she would even try. Circe——why where on earth is she ? I believe she has been spirited away in this darkness.”

“By the devil, probably, whom she owns as her master,” thought Max, smiling

grimly. "I'll send her and her insinuation to Kamtschatka, and never say a word to Quita of what I have heard. It would be mad to put ideas into her head which I am sure have never entered there. She loves me, I know! God bless her! But will she always love me? Will no one come between her and me? She is so ignorant of the world. She is such a child, that she has had no chance of learning her own heart!"

As he walked in to dinner, with some stranger, to whom he had been told off, the brilliant light fell on him, and Mrs. Adair marked at once the shadow on his face.

"I brought that there," she murmured to herself, with a grim feeling of satisfaction. "Those few words of mine about Erroll have laid the first match to the train. It makes me mad to think that he should have dared to prefer that white-faced chit to —me!"

And looking at her own glowing attractions in an opposite mirror, the sight hardened her even more against the man who had rejected her.





CHAPTER VI.

CAN-CAN.

“ Beauties, in vain their pretty eyes may roll ;
Charms strike the sight, but merit wins the soul.”

MRS. ADAIR had never said anything nearer the truth. She had put the first match to the train which was to undermine Max's new-found happiness. She had, with a rough hand and *malice prepense*, crushed the fair bloom from the peach, and its speedy decay was inevitable. And, instead of experiencing one pang of regret or compunction for her foul work, the Beauty rejoiced.

That many women are whited sepulchres

and cheats we all know ; but as we forget the pearl powder and rouge, the *crème à l'Impératrice*, the vermillion on the lips, to admire a beauty which does not exist, so we admire a lovely casket, and forget that it contains an evil soul.

The green-eyed monster who desecrates everything by suspicion had his fangs well into Max's heart, turning all the sweet, pleasant thoughts which he had hitherto given to his wife into bitterness and distrust.

So it was that when Quita's brown eyes shone less brightly than usual, he put it down at once to the fact that she was brooding over her first love ; and if her lips expanded into smiles, he knew that a secret cause for joy existed ; and if she was lost in thought, of course she was thinking of Erroll Adair ; and if she gave way to an impulse, and threw her arms round her husband's neck, it was only to conceal

real infidelity under a mask of deceit ; and this last was worst of all.

A pity that Max had not one of those comfortable, properly regulated natures that take things as they come ; in which case he would have made the creature he loved unto worship, infinitely happier than he was *en train* to do now. Angry, reckless, miserable, he made some trifling excuse to Cortland, and, long before that fiend Mrs. Adair opened her great dusky eyes on this wicked world, he was miles away from Bucklands.

There, on the eve of the same day, the cloth was off, the tied-back skirts of the ladies had vanished, the glasses rattled, and Carte Blanche and Roussillon went round, and the men grew animated and talkative.

There is an old Scotch saying, that when three women are gathered together the devil is sure to make a fourth.

How about men ?

Their mouths are supposed to be shut by "honour," a most imposing word in the abstract. Yet how many female reputations are blown away for good and all by the ribald lips of convivial spirits round the dessert-table.

"Vereker went off this morning. He did not stay long, though the Adair was gracious enough," said Meredith of the Guards, regretfully.

"I am sorry we have lost him—he is a capital fellow," added Warner, a lively, briefless barrister.

"And confoundedly handsome," drawled a young cornet, raw as a March morning.

"Reggy is right. If I was a woman I should be head over ears in love with Vereker. Strange that one never hears of any love affair in conjunction with him, though the women were crazy over him in Rome," said Cortland.

“Who the devil is he?” growled Montessor, an irritable old plunger, whose life was spent in eating and drinking, and who had just aroused from a dream of a capital *salmi* and *soufflet à la vanille*, for which the Bucklands cook was famous.

“Don’t know; a nobody, I believe,” drawled the little cornet again, with the fumes of the Roussillon reddening his boyish face; “remarkably nice-looking for a nobody too.”

“Tut! Vereker is an excellent name. He is a Hampshire Vereker, Cortland, isn’t he?”

“Yes, but thereby hangs a tale. Old Maximilian Vereker was a bit of a Don Juan in his youth, and Quentin (Max’s stepbrother) brought a charge of some marriage certificate being *non est*, and managed to get hold of all the loaves and fishes; but those who know the story well say that Max is sure to get back his own,

directly he can find funds for search and the harpies of the law like you, Warner."

"I'd do the job for him for nothing. I believe in Max; there's no bar sinister about him. Poor devil, he has to paint hard enough to live now."

"He is doing a thing for me, but he could not find a face to his taste for a long time," said Cortland.

"Why on earth didn't he take Mrs. Adair? She would have been delighted. It would have been nuts to her to have her face adorning Bucklands, while her sister beauties are running a neck-to-neck race for Bucklands' master," laughed Warner; "besides, she would have enjoyed the sittings. She and Vereker understand one another so thoroughly," he added mischievously, stealing a covert look at his host.

Cortland coloured a little.

"Pshaw! Mrs. Adair scarcely knows Vereker. She met him once or twice in Italy, that's all."

"Did *she* tell you that? I am afraid if she did that her ruby lips don't stick to truth. She and Vereker are quite old flames, and as he is supposed to be a sort of *âme damnée*, socially, I wonder at it."

"I don't," cried the duke crossly. "It all comes of the Liberal ideas about; people should stick to caste, especially abroad, and then they would not run against shady acquaintances at home."

"Well, whatever the Adair's feeling may be now for Vereker I don't fancy he cares for her, having another divinity like a Greuze somewhere, the sweetest, prettiest little thing I have ever seen."

"Who?" cried several voices, on the *qui vive* for a new beauty.

"Don't know; a governess or dependent

of the Adairs, whom he met down in Hampshire."

"And married?" asked Cortland.

Warner screwed up his mouth.

"*That* I don't know."

"Where can he have hidden her?" Cortland questioned eagerly. The Adair's charms had begun to pall; and a bachelor—rich, and able to procure himself all the good things he wanted—*par conséquence* easily wearied; a little *blasé*, and always in quest of new things to make life pleasant.

"Haven't you Vereker's address, if he is working for you?"

"Of course; he only gave it to me yesterday. Here it is—Acacia Cottage, Surbiton."

"*She's* sure to be there!" cried Meredith positively.

"Why?"

"Why? Because Acacia Cottage and morality don't sound natural."

"I'll call and see," Cortland thought to himself, but he was wise enough to keep his own counsel.

Five minutes later, Cortland walked into the drawing-room and threw himself down on a lounge beside Mrs. Adair. She was looking pale and out of spirits, but even lovelier than usual, in a quiet black dress, with Neapolitan violets peeping here and there from her hair, and a great bunch nestling near her white throat; and, as usual, her pet poodle, Cara, lay curled in a snowball in her lap.

"You have been in town all day," she said listlessly, forcing a faint smile to her mouth.

"Yes."

"And what is the last topic?"

"Diamonds."

“Diamonds! Whose?”

“Lady Northland’s.”

At the name, Mrs. Adair brightened up a little, and her features expressed more interest. Lady Northland was a sister Beauty.

“Well?”

“Well, Northland has made a fool of himself—*voilà tout*.”

“Not about her, surely? About someone else, I suppose?”

“I mean he has overreached himself, and all the world are laughing at him. He told his wife that she must go yachting with him, if she wanted to keep her diamonds; but if she preferred Lental Kane’s society, he should sell the jewels. So she went for a week or two, kept the diamonds, and then quietly spent a month where Kane had his hunters.”

“How utterly horrid of her,” murmured Mrs. Adair, in a languid tone of virtuous indignation.

"You look *triste* and pale, *chère dame*," Cortland said, regarding her keenly; "what has come over the spirit of your dream?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing! That is more laconic than satisfactory."

She was silent, her eyes downcast, her fingers toying with her poodle's fluffy hair; and he bit his lips.

"Vereker played me a shabby trick in leaving this morning," he said carelessly. "What a nice fellow he is! He sings and plays like a professional, too. Do you like him?"

"Tol, lol!" she answered affectedly, with the slanginess she often used; but she pulled Cara's hair, and the poodle yelped.

"I wonder why he left so abruptly? Has he met more attractive elsewhere? He cannot have, surely!" he said pointedly.

"I really don't know! Even if he had

hinted that it was so, I shouldn't have believed him. Men are so apt to say that sort of thing to women. It's only a ruse for exciting a little jealousy and desire for competition !”

“By-the-way—did you ever have a *tête-à-tête* with Vereker, *chère amie* ?”

The sudden question blanched her face, then a hot crimson swept over it.

“Curiosity is a plebeian vice, your grace !” she replied quietly. “And it is the last thing I should have credited you with !”

“*Soit !* Still, *had* you one ?”

“Well, yes ! I did.”

“By accident or by purpose ?”

“By purpose.”

“So !” and Cortland's face darkened.

“Suppose I wanted to teach him, that if a man paints a lady's face for filthy lucre, he has no right to make love to her !”

“And Vereker made love to you ?”

She nodded her head.

“ And you snubbed him ? ”

“ Of course ! ”

He looked her straight in the face with a peculiar expression on his features, but she avoided his glance. So he laughed quietly.

“ Ah ! *chère dame*, don't you know that ' he comes too near who comes to be denied ! ' ” he said, meaningly. “ Besides, Vereker is scarcely a man a woman would snub ! ”

“ *Some* women might not ! ” she answered sullenly, for it vexed her even to think of Max in conjunction with other women.

Cortland eyed her furtively. Somehow, though she was in the zenith of her success, though her name was on every lip, and though royalty itself had noticed her charms, her beauty seemed dimmed to him that night, or he had begun to weary of it. She had played with his feelings, and coquetted with him for two years, and the unpleasant

conviction that she had carried on the same contemptible game with a score of others, including Max, gave a sharp wound to the duke's *amour propre*; which, to a man of his organisation, was a death-stab to any feeling.

She watched him covertly for a few minutes. She was sharp enough to see that her power was waning, and it railed her, for strawberry-leaves decking one of her slaves was a thorn in the flesh to the other professional beauties.

"*À propos*. I saw little Mrs. Dare in the Row the other day looking like a bit of exquisite china, in a dark green brougham with a pair of chestnut steppers," she said, glancing up at him with volumes of reproach in her lovely *entraînante* eyes.

"*À propos de quoi ?*" asked Cortland innocently, but he put up her fan with which he had been playing to conceal a passing flush.

"Oh, *à propos* to flirtation. I fancied

I had seen the trap before. Have I, I wonder?"

"Perhaps you have; but I do not exactly see how the loan of a carriage to a lady constitutes a flirtation."

"*Cela dépend* to what lady it is lent. It seems to come so natural, Mrs. Dare and flirtation, doesn't it? But since when has your grace taken to admiring paint, pearl powder, and aureoline?" she questioned, with *malice prepense*.

"Since charms *au naturel* were getting too much for my peace," he replied sentimentally, but with a smile lurking in the corners of his mouth.

The lazy odalisque eyes caught that smile, and the Beauty frowned unmistakably. The man was laughing at her, of course; and only a little while ago he was madly in love with her. She did not care a fig for him, but she sorely resented any defection in her followers.

She chased away the puckers from her fair forehead and put on a wistful look.

"Tennyson never wrote more truthfully than when he said :

"Hearts are more than coronets,
And simple faith than Norman blood,"

she murmured plaintively. "Do you know, I don't believe you ever cared a straw about me ; but only pretended to because I happened to be the fashion. I should like to——"

"Brain me with your fan ! eh ? But, badinage apart, I have a little *quid pro quo* for you in the shape of a verse :

If she be not fair for me
What care I how fair she be.

And though I am quite willing to allow that Vereker is a splendid fellow, I am not sufficiently hungry to pick up the crumbs he left."

A fitful crimson surged over her face right up to her delicate blue-veined temples, and right down her marble pillar of a throat.

She had been foolish enough to show her *penchant* for Max.

“Your grace has forgotten to put on the cap and bells to-night—fit accompaniments for such absurd fancies,” she said with a gleam of insolence in her eyes, but with a forced smile; “or else your world-renowned Roussillon has gone round once too often.”

“No; neither wine nor folly prompted my words. But, like a bee among the flowers, I ought only to have sipped the sweets and not attempted to dive below the surface. So *milles pardons*.”

“Granted! And do you know I rather like your insinuations after all?”

“Because——?”

“Because they may possibly arise from a feeling that would flatter me—jealousy.

Ciel! how I have suffered sometimes, and *en revanche*, I don't mind the green-eyed monster having a nibble at you.

"You have suffered!" he cried sceptically, thinking that the woman with marvellous beauty, but with not an atom of soul, could suffer nothing; since Nature, in adorning her outwardly, had totally forgotten to furnish her mind.

"Suffered! I should think so. Do you remember one night at Covent Garden? It was 'Faust and Margherita' I think."

"Yes; and you made such *grands yeux* at Campanini."

"And you devoted yourself to *that* Miss Braham who was in the stalls."

"I remember she was in the stalls, but do not recollect the devotion. Still, what of it?"

"I suffered."

"Of course you did. But you were jealous, not of me. It was of someone

better born and better looking than your humble servant. I was never one of Miss Braham's adorers. She is handsome, but too *prononcée* for my taste."

"Since when have you taken to milk diet? You will end by being *infatuée* with one of those charming creatures of whom Byron says :

"The nursery lisps in all they utter,
And they smell of bread-and-butter."

Cortland gave a grim smile. He was more of a practical than a romantic turn, but her contemptuous words jarred on his ear.

He had seen so much of women who were too utterly realistic—without a scrap of the romance that young fresh natures must possess to a certain extent.

"The truth is, *ma belle*, you have aired your pretty wings so long in the world's

false glare, and have been so flattered and spoiled by the admiration of the million, that goodness and innocence provoke a sneer on your lips instead of eulogium. If I marry it will be——”

“Phyllis, with fat red cheeks, *gauche* manners, and——”

“*Not* a Professional Beauty,” he interrupted laughingly.

“Aristotle says beauty is the best letter of recommendation in the world,” cried Mrs. Adair, airing her knowledge.

“And Theophrastus declares that beauty is a silent cheat; but there, we won’t quarrel any more. Shake hands.”

And under cover of the big fan with hideous Japanese monstrosities adorning it, five long slender fingers, all sparkling with gems, gave him a warm pressure.

“That’s right; we have hauled up the flag of truce, and now I want you to tell me something.”

"I know! that I care for no one else but——"

"Adair, of course; and he is worth it! A capital fellow before his marriage; but *tant soit peu* bearish since he was *désillusionné*, I am afraid."

She made a slight grimace.

"I think it is awfully cruel of you to remind me of——"

"Mrs. Adair's husband, eh? I confess it is rather hard, especially when you can enjoy all the good things of the earth that he gives you without the *gêne* of himself."

"It was a fair enough bargain, surely," she pouted. "He gave me money in return for my good looks."

"Which all the world get a chance of admiring more than he does. By Jove, if I were Adair, or the husband of any professional beauty, I should kill my wife, or myself."

“Thank goodness you are not Mr. Adair! The world is remarkably kind to me, and I am too pleased with life to care to say adieu to it yet.”

“Yet it would be better now, perhaps, than later, when real death might be preferable to a living one. But I am actually drifting into moralising. Fancy moralising, with a professional beauty for audience! why, it must be more strange to her ears than Euclid. Tell me, has Max Vereker an—attachment?”

The question fell so abruptly that it struck her like a bombshell, and she reddened.

“An attachment! Why?”

“Why, only because I fancied so; but evidently you are not cognisant of the subject.”

They were entirely at cross purposes. She thought, in her consummate conceit, that he meant she was the object of Max’s love; and he said to himself:

"Evidently she knows nothing. Of course he has managed to hoodwink us all. But I'll unearth his little game."

"What are you thinking of?" Mrs. Adair asked, softly laying her hand on his arm.

He started a little.

"Of you, of course, *m'amie!*" he whispered. "*Could* a man think of anyone else when you were by?"

And the duke bent his young face towards hers, and looked down right into her eyes.

They were magnificent eyes, that the world had gone mad over; but the time was past for him to lose his head or his heart in their dangerous depths.

Early on the following morning, he quietly left his guests and went up to town; and at three o'clock in the afternoon, knocked softly at the tiny door of Acacia Cottage, Surbiton. Various remarks about the little "Greuze" had

made an impression on his inflammable nature, and he was in the habit of gratifying every whim, without counting the cost.

A cherry-cheeked damsel answered the summons, looking shy and flustered.

"Is Mr. Vereker at home?"

"No, sir."

"Will he be at home soon?"

"No, sir."

"Provoking! I must leave a message, if I cannot see him."

The girl grew ruddier than a cherry, and twisted the corner of her white apron nervously in her thick fingers. She was evidently unaccustomed to visitors, and regarded the good-looking specimen of the *jeunesse dorée* before her, as curiously as she would have regarded a suspicious tramp or ill-favoured burglar.

"Can I see anybody? or write a note?" asked Cortland, waxing impatient.

"I don't know. Maybe you might just step inside and write," she answered dubiously.

"Stay, here's my card, in case I can see someone. The Duke of Cortland, you may say to anyone at home, my good girl," and he held out the bit of pasteboard.

She gazed at him round-eyed and open-mouthed. Good gracious! a dook—a real, *real* dook! She had seen Her Most Gracious Majesty in Hyde Park in the distance, and a thrill of awe and loyalty ran through her rustic heart; and she had waited among the motley crowd to see the Prince and Princess come out of Marlborough House, more beautiful than all the princes and princesses of fairy tales; but to think that a real live dook should be standing there like any other common man, just flesh and blood and nothing else, and talking to her as nicely as if he were only "'Arry," the pot-house boy, with whom she walked out on Sundays.

She stared at him breathless, growing so crimson about the chubby cheeks, that Cortland feared she was going to have an apoplectic fit. Then, after a moment or two, she carefully wiped her fingers on her apron, and took the card so nervously, that it slipped from her grasp and was caught on the bough of a rose-tree that trailed along the wall.

She did not stop to pick it up, but made a summary bolt down a little hall, and disappeared from view, while Cortland quietly followed her.

He was resolute not to be balked in his desire to see a new beauty, someone, Warner said, to whom none of the others could compare.

On he went through a prettily-lighted hall, redolent with roses and sweet-peas, into a sitting-room, and standing in the centre, he looked round.

He wanted to see by the surroundings if

the divinity enshrined within the cottage walls was after the same type as the Adair, the Braham, or the rest, who had set the world in a blaze with their transcendent charms.

The room was simplicity itself. Pale-blue hangings, with bouquets of pink buds scattered over them; the furniture covered to match; flowers everywhere, on the white marble mantelpiece, on brackets, on the table; and on the top of the pianette a tall pearly vase, with a lovely "Madame Falcot" queening it over her sister blossoms; music, and work, and books; half-finished pencil sketches; and on the floor a glove—a tiny glove, fit for Cinderella, but soiled with gardening; and His Grace the Duke of Cortland, whose attentions were prized by all the fine ladies of the Court, stooped and picked up the glove, and with a hot flush on his cheek, thrust it into his breast-pocket.

Scarcely had it disappeared into its aristocratic quarters, when a voice fell on his ear.

A voice so sweet and fresh and childlike that Cortland knew at once it belonged to a sweet, fresh, and childlike soul.

"Mary! come and help me pick some raspberries for dessert!"

"Domestic bliss with a vengeance," sneered Cortland as he listened. "Raspberries for dessert; primitive amusement at any rate;" but he was conscious of an indefinable feeling of envy of Max all the time.

The next instant she walked in.

The little Greuze that he had longed to see; and she was lovelier than the loveliest flowers of spring to the eyes of the "real live dook," who was satiated with maturer and more *prononcée* beauties, bizarre and bewildering, but with the first soft bloom of what we call "*Beauté du Diable*"

vanished. She wore a simple little pink cambric with just a knot of ribbon to match at her throat and wrists, and her hair, worn *à l'enfant* to please Max, was brushed carelessly off her low white brow and fell in long loose wavy masses over her shoulders below her slim waist. A vivid colour burnt in her cheeks, and surprise made her big eyes look bigger and brighter.

She uttered a faint exclamation, but held her basket of raspberries fast and unabashed, and Cortland, quite *en son assiette* at Buckingham Palace, stood like some rustic Corydon, or even 'Arry, the pot-house boy, awkward and silent.

Then his old self got the better of him, and, hat in hand, he advanced towards her with a smile.

"So sorry to intrude. Still I cannot regret coming, for one does not see everyday such a face as Acacia Cottage owns."

There was bold admiration in his look and tone ; and Quita, child as she was and unaccustomed to the world, felt embarrassed and uncomfortable, and grew pale.

"Don't let me frighten you. I am dreadfully harmless I can assure you," he said gently ; "I wanted to see Vereker about 'Hermia.'"

She looked up into his face quite relieved.

"I know," she cried, "you are the Duke of Cortland. Max is out, but I can tell him if you want anything altered in the picture."

"I have not seen it yet. May I?" he asked courteously.

"Yes. Will you come into the studio?"

And quite at her ease she walked in beside him.

"Hermia" was on the easel.

"*Your face!*" cried Cortland. "I owe Vereker ten thousand thanks for giving me such a treat. The face on my wall,

though only on canvas, will send all the living and glowing beauties at my board in the shade."

"I am glad you like the painting; Max has taken pains with it, and he will be pleased to hear it meets with your approval," she said, in a quiet businesslike voice.

He saw it was useless to try and get up even a shadow of flirtation.

Was she married?

He looked eagerly to see if a little golden circlet went round the third finger, but the fellow glove to the one that lay snugly in his breast-pocket covered her hand.

"I think it would be best if I waited till Vereker showed me 'Hermia' himself, before I give my opinion of it," he said awkwardly.

She glanced up at him inquiringly.

"You see, he might be vexed at my coming here."

"Then why did you come?" she asked simply.

The blood flew to his face, and he did not know what to answer. The pure little face, with its large honest brown eyes and candid mouth, frightened him more than he would have confessed to, and he almost wished he had not given way to the impulse which had brought him there.

"I shall make a point of seeing Vereker as soon as possible; but you must make me a promise that you will not tell him I have been here. I have good reasons for this, I can assure you," he said earnestly.

"I should like the pleasure of telling Max you like his work," she persisted.

"Still, I beg of you, let me be the first to tell him. Will you promise?"

"Yes," she answered, fearing to vex Max's best patron. But her heart misgave her a little.

"Good-bye, then," and Cortland put out

his hand. She shook hands with him, and in another moment he was gone.

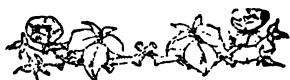
Quita stood a few moments in the centre of the room.

“What a strange man,” she thought; “and he is another of *her* victims, Max said. She has turned his head, perhaps, for he did not seem to know what he came for, or what he was saying. I wish I could have told Max about the ‘Hermia,’ but I must keep my promise, I suppose. He has plenty of money, so I must not offend him. I wonder if *she* flirts with him still, and makes Erroll unhappy. I hope not.”

She walked into the sitting-room, and took up some flowers she had gathered.

“There! Max will admire that! Madame Falcot looks lovely with those Sofrano buds round her, and Max likes to look at pretty things, he has such an artistic eye, poor fellow!”

Poor fellow ! It was always that ; never *dear* fellow. And yet she made him as true and good a wife as though he had been the first and dearest love of her life.





CHAPTER VII.

C'EST LE PREMIER PAS QUI COÛTE.

“Jealousy ! each other passion’s calm
To thee—thou conflagration of the soul ;
Thou king of torments, thou grand counterpoise,
For all the transports beauty can inspire.”

MADAME FALCOT and her Sofrano supports were doomed to waste their first freshness and sweetness in the desert air, for Max did not come home to his seven-o’clock dinner as usual, and his wife objected to dine in solitary grandeur. So the cutlets and peas that Max affectioned were set aside for a cup of tea and a morsel of brown bread-and-butter, that Quita, in her simple taste,

preferred to aught else. And then she sat herself down to knit a pair of deep blue silk socks for Max, which she was making to match his eyes.

The evening wore on slowly and heavily, and the little clock chimed ten ; and, wondering a little what had detained Max, she got up and peered wistfully through the window, but only shrubs and plants in shadow met her view, and a gentle lilting of the summer wind sounded rather *triste* in her ear. So she turned down the lamp, and flinging herself on a lounge, closed her eyes. By-and-by sleep stole upon her, and her thick curling lashes swept close over her cheeks, all flushed with a pretty warm glow, like the cheeks of a slumbering child.

Max entered the room unheard. He did not look well ; but as his eyes fell on his wife they lit up, and his lips softened into the tenderness of a woman.

He crept on tiptoe, nearer and nearer,

and as he regarded her he clasped his hands as if in prayer.

Poor Max ; he loved her so !

After a second he dropped down on his knees by her, immoveable, as if he were made of stone, then suddenly Mrs. Adair's words rose up in his mind, and a curious thrill of anger shot through him.

Suppose it was true what that woman had averred. Suppose Erroll Adair really possessed Quita's heart. Perhaps—perhaps, her whole being really belonged absolutely to another man, and only the casket that held her soul—to *him*, to her husband.

Unconsciously to himself his clasped hands fell apart ; then they mounted slowly, slowly up and up towards the fair white throat of the sleeping girl and rested within a few inches of it.

“ I could still her life in a second ! ” he muttered, the blood mounting over his face. “ Kill her, and thus keep her pure

and good for evermore. She would die without the devil having claimed her for his own, die and go up to heaven among her sister-angels. But if I let her live—oh, God!—who shall say how long she will be kept from temptation? I'll kill her! It is ten thousand times better that I should swing for my crime than that she should fall—fall!"

His voice had been monotonous all through, but at the last word it dropped low and hoarse; and, springing to his feet, he bent over his wife, her face close to his own.

The expression of his features was terrible; a mixture of love and hate, triumph and misery, passion and pathos infinite.

"It is in my power to shield you from all evil now, my darling, my little one, and I will! One kiss, and then these hands shall but go round and it will all

be over. Over for her and over for me !”

He bent and pressed a light caress on her hair.

“ God take you unto himself !” he cried, and he caught her little throat.

In the twinkle of an eye he was outside the door, leaning against it heavily, his hands shaking as if palsy had stricken them, his face terrified, livid.

“ Thank God—thank God !” he gasped, “ I have not harmed her—I have not harmed her. I have not *murder* on my soul !”

And in a minute or two he walked into the room, quiet and collected.

Quita was awake.

She was sitting upon the lounge, with her hands covering her face, and as Max entered she uttered a little cry.

“ Oh, Max ! I have had such a dreadful dream ! I dreamt someone was leaning

over me, and when I tried to push him away he grasped my throat! I am so glad you have come, Max; I always feel safe when you are near."

He staggered back a little as she said that, and averted his eyes. Then he went and pulled her gently up from the chair, trying to steady his glance and his hands as well as he could.

"Perhaps it was *I*. I daresay I might try and kill you, if I thought you did not love me," he said, in a quiet constrained voice.

"*You!*" and she laughed. "I am not afraid of *you*; besides, you would not be so silly a man as to give way to impossible fancies!"

"Impossible! Is it impossible for you to be faithless to me?"

"*Quite*, Max!" and she looked him straight in the face, with her honest truthful eyes.

"You will swear you will never deceive me?" he persisted.

She flushed scarlet—even then she had promised to deceive him—and, to hide the tell-tale colour, she dropped her face on his breast.

"Darling! your answer is enough," he said, with one of the rare tender smiles that had won her heart.

The next morning—a morning in June, the month of roses—broke with a brilliance that had an influence on Max. He was easily impressed and affected by externals, as most dreamy poetical natures are, and he looked back on the mad thought of the night before half in laughter and half in horror, fully resolving to check his tendency to doubt.

But Quita could not recover so easily. She crept about the cottage like a culprit, unhappy and restless. She counted the moments till she could make a clean

breast of Cortland's visit; and yet, knowing Max's disposition, she feared to tell him about it.

"What are you creeping about in that miserable way for, darling?" Max asked laughingly. "Is it because I startled you out of your sleep? You look like a small white ghost, my child."

She would have looked doubly like a ghost if she had divined his wild thoughts while she slept. As it was, she turned white and then red.

"Have you been crying?" he exclaimed, bending and scrutinising her features. "Do you think I am unkind, love?"

"No, Max! It is I."

She broke down and almost choked in her effort to stifle a sob, she felt so dreadfully wicked and unhinged.

"I know what it is. You were too much alone yesterday, and you are depressed and dull. I never leave you from

choice, my darling; and wherever I am, I am always longing to be back in this dear little room, with my sweet one in my arms."

She did not answer, but the tears fell down her cheeks in spite of him.

"Come into the studio and mix my colours. Silly child, to cry for nothing like this."

He went up to the open window as he spoke for a breath of air, and the gleam of something white caught his eye on the rose branch hard by.

"What's this?" he said to his wife, who had followed him.

Quita looked, and then longed to sink through the floor. She saw it was a card. She guessed it was Cortland's, and in her bewilderment she clung convulsively to her husband's arm.

Max looked at it.

Surprise, sorrow, intense desolation, were written on his mobile features. He looked

just like a man awaking from a dream of heaven and love and peace to an atmosphere rife with tempests and bloodshed and devilment. At last all other expressions in his face were merged into one of stern inquiry as he looked up at his wife.

She had let go of his arm, and stood like a criminal, with her face covered by her hands, and large drops oozing through her slender fingers.

"Do you know the Duke of Cortland?" he asked in a low, hushed voice.

She bent her head.

"Ah, God! who can one trust in this world?" he cried, dropping into a chair, and flinging out his arms on the table, he buried his face upon them.

"Max, please hear me! I was afraid to tell you that anyone had called and seen me. You know you don't like me to speak to anyone but yourself," Quita said piteously, putting her hand on his arm.

But he flung her off like a poisonous insect, and answered in a high-pitched tone, his lips pale as ashes :

"So you are afraid of me ! Of me who have been gentle and fond as a woman to you. All my love, my worship, has been lavished to bring *nothing* in return ! Where I have given my heart I have but deceit for reward ! And yet, do you know," and he seized her hands in a grasp like a vice, "that I have been mad enough, fool and dolt enough, to flatter myself sometimes that I had succeeded in winning love for love !"

"So you have, Max," and Quita fell down on her knees before him and pressed her hot quivering lips to the hands that hurt her, "so you have ! I was only afraid to tell you because that man said he knew you better than I did, and you would be angry at my seeing him."

"It is the first time I have found you

out in deception, Quita. We have only been married a few months, and already my eyes are opening," he said bitterly. "Perhaps your nature is not frank, and you have kept many things from me which I had a right to know. I have been told that your first love was not given to me."

He stood before her, his arms crossed, his burning eyes never moving from their fixed regard.

The colour swept in a deep crimson tide over her face, up to her blue-veined temples, over her slender throat.

Max gasped for breath a moment.

"Guilty, so help me Heaven!" he cried, and the words burst in a sort of desperate wail from his lips, as if his soul had passed out with them.

"Guilty!" answered Quita, in a low but distinct voice.

She was pale, white as a snowflake, as Erroll had been wont to call her; but

she had risen to her feet and stood erect, unflinching, firm.

"I loved my cousin, Erroll Adair, before I knew you. He was kind and good to me when I was a child and won my love. I thought he loved me as I loved him; but when I found that it was only as a brother he cared for me, I thrust the old feeling away and learnt to look upon him as another woman's husband. You may believe me or not, Max, but since I married you there has been no feeling in my heart that is not loyal to you."

Max paced the room with clenched hands, striving vainly to quell the fever within him; and she, going up noiselessly as a spirit, clasped his arm again.

"Forgive me, Max, for my tardy confession. I did not know it was wrong not to tell you long ago about Erroll," she faltered, but her words roused up the demon in Max into fury.

"Forgive you," he cried fiercely, flinging away her hand as if it scorched him. "Forgive you, why? Because you have deceived me from beginning to end; because you are not content with having deceived me about Erroll Adair but you must needs carry on the same game about Cortland, a stranger to you, a fickle, volatile, dissipated being, whose days are spent in loving women and throwing them aside like so many withered blossoms or worn-out flowers. But, of course, it is only because he is rich, because he has a title, while I—oh, God!"

He paused, struggling with his breath, and then went on, lashing himself into greater fury.

"And how do I know you are faithful to me? How do I know that you are not still cherishing a wicked love for Adair? How do I know I am not being fooled, sinned against hourly, daily? Oh, Quita, you will drive me mad!"

He rushed from the room, and she did not attempt to follow him. She sat quite stunned for awhile, and when at last she roused a little to consciousness, she tried to realise the life that lay before her.

Did she care enough for her husband to brave the rocks and shoals ahead? she wondered.

It required a great, great love to stand reproach and jealousy and suspicion.

While she questioned herself, Max's face rose up vividly before her, and she read on his features, his heart, as plainly as though it were bared to her sight. Somehow, in spite of the scene just enacted, resentment and anger found no place in her breast. A soft smile broke on her mouth, a tender light stole into her eyes.

Suddenly the door opened, and before she could articulate a syllable, Max had his arms round her.

"I am a brute, a thorough-paced brute

and ruffian !” he cried penitently. “Can you ever forgive me ? Can you forget all I said to you, my darling !”

“I am not deceitful !” she sobbed, clinging to him. “And, Max ! I love you ! don’t you *feel* it ?”





CHAPTER VIII.

ONLY A LULL.

“But agony unmixed, incessant gall
Corrodes every thought, and blasting all.”

So peace was made ; but it was only a lull ;
a house built upon shifting sand ; a castle of
cards, that the smallest shake would de-
molish ; a mirage of the desert, lovely
to-day and vanished on the morrow.

“I shall ask Cortland to dinner, so that
you and he may be *properly* acquainted,”
Max said to his wife ; “and once you know
him *en règle*, you won’t blush when his
name is mentioned. I daresay you think

me dreadfully selfish, pet, but I hate you to blush about anybody, it gives me such a stab."

"You see, Max, if you did not care about me you could not be jealous, so I ilke you to be jealous," Quita answered, in her complete ignorance of human nature, or she would have known that, though jealousy may sometimes be a proof of affection, it is far oftener the offspring of intense self-conceit, of an overweening egregious vanity, that is so fearful of being hurt that it perpetually cries like the nettles, *noli me tangere!*

The duke was out when Max reached Bucklands, but his friend Warner was in the library, lolling in a great chair, intent on Paul de Kock's last novel, and smoking like a chimney. He looked up as Max walked in, and greeted him cordially.

"Is Cortland from home? I rather wanted to see him?"

"No; only wandering about the park somewhere like a restless spirit, I fancy. He has lost his heart."

"Nothing new that, I imagine," Max said carelessly, taking a chair and helping himself to a cigarette. "Who may be the last divinity?"

"I don't know if I am not telling tales out of school," Warner said with a laugh; "but his grace has discovered a *rara avis*—a sort of babe in the wood—a sprite with eyes like a gazelle, and hair more marvellous than the fair one with the golden locks."

"Really!" ejaculated Max, and the words somehow galled and fretted him.

"Really! Cortland is off his chump about her."

"And who is the fair one?"

"I don't know. Quite a recent discovery, I believe."

"Is she single or—married?" questioned Max—while his voice shook a little in spite

of him. "If she happens to be the latter, Cortland's sudden passion may be as hopeless as it is gigantic!"

Warner glanced at him, and burst into a cynical laugh.

"Why, Vereker, one would really think you had but just emerged from the ark! She may be married or not, but she took a fancy to Cortland all the same, I fancy."

Max felt a sudden and violent inclination to strangle the speaker; he hated such levity in a man; but he gave himself a mental shake to throw off the weight that had crept over him.

"What an idiot I am," he thought; "there are shoals of women with gazelle-like eyes and marvellous hair, about; and yet I must needs worry myself about it!"

So he banished fears, and challenged Warner to a game of billiards. And then luncheon came, and the wine went round, as usual opening the mouths of the men, of

which some half-a-dozen of Cortland's boon companions were staying at Bucklands.

"You have not had any of the fair sex here for ages, Cortland," said Meredith. "How on earth have you managed to exist?"

"Pshaw! I hate petticoats," the duke answered curtly. He was evidently cross, or in love, or certainly not himself.

"Since when?" cried two or three voices.

"Some women spoil one for the mass," Cortland said gravely.

"You have found that out in a country ramble," Meredith cried. "I saw you the day before yesterday, though you did not see me. Is she dark or fair? Has she black eyes or blue? Fair, with black ones, for a sov.! For I heard you raving at breakfast, about midnight skies, and the tints of a seashell when the amorous waves kiss it!"

"Very poetical," Cortland replied, colour-

ing like a school-boy, "but, *un peu exagéré*. I 'admire all sorts and conditions of women.' But I am not so susceptible as you fellows think! Come and have a look at a little 'Meissonnier' I bought yesterday, Vereker. It is hung in the drawing-room."

Max rose mechanically; but a sudden dizziness swooped over him, and for a second he held on to the table to steady himself, then he followed his host, and in a few moments both men were standing before the newly-purchased painting, but neither of them thinking of its merits, though it was a perfect little gem.

"Did she tell you?" asked Cortland, in a low mysterious whisper.

Max gave a perceptible start.

"She! Who?"

The duke gave a low and complacent little laugh, a cross between an expres-

sion of amusement and a chuckle of vanity.

"By Jove! what a little brick she is to have kept the secret!"

"I don't know who you are talking about," Max said stiffly, crushing down a horrible feeling of annoyance.

"About the most delicious little fairy in the world, Vereker. You *are* a lucky fellow! It is not often one picks up such a jewel, whom a man would be proud to make his duchess, even."

Max stared at him a moment, and then he understood.

"I *am* proud," he answered slowly and firmly. "Mrs. Vereker, whom I conclude is the object of your eulogy, is a lady to be proud of in every sense."

"Mrs. Vereker!" repeated Cortland, laughing. "*She* is charming, but of course I know better than that. I have

not lived eight-and-twenty years in this wicked world, my dear fellow, without knowing by heart all the tricks of the trade. I believe matrimony is one of those stern institutions that invariably stamps itself on the face and manners of a woman."

"And what did you notice in the face and manners of the lady you allude to, to make you suppose she is *not*—married?"

Max had himself well under control now, but inwardly he chafed like a lion.

"What did I notice! Oh, a certain absence of prudery—a *je ne sais quoi*—which told me at once that the lovely mistress of Acacia Cottage was only a temporary *suzeraine*."

A dead silence for one moment, while Max stooped to pick up his handkerchief, dropped on purpose.

"Your skill in reading human faces has for once failed, your grace. Notwith-

standing the lack of reticence you noticed, the lady you saw is—Mrs. Vereker.”

“By name of course she is—*cela va sans dire*—but, in reality——”

“Also !”

“A truce to joking. I don’t vindicate such arrangements as a rule ; but I know that circumstances sometimes bring them about, and occasionally a *vie à deux* is as respectable a *ménage* as a married one, so why should you repudiate a conquest of one of the prettiest creatures I have ever looked upon ?”

Max flushed almost purple, and the veins on his temples stood out like knotted chords. To a man of his temperament, with the demon of jealousy gnawing his soul in twain, the idea that the other’s ribald gaze had rested unrebuked on his wife’s features was maddening ; a deadly sickness crept over him, and his hands grew chill as death.

“Answer me one question honestly,” he said, after a momentary pause, “and I will reply to you truthfully about the lady. What did she say to you to make you think she was *not* my wife?”

But the duke was quite wide-awake, and equal to fencing.

“What did she say to me? *Nothing!* I simply judged from a certain—*abandon*—a look—frank and fearless in her lovely eyes, such a look as married women do not usually give to strangers.”

“And you, who have lived eight-and-twenty years in this wicked world, did not know how to discriminate between boldness and innocence! You never thought of putting that *abandon* down to youth, simplicity, ignorance of life! It never struck you that that frank and fearless glance was born of a pure and child-like nature, that has never even dreamt of guile!”

There was so much real pathos, so much intense deprecation in the man's voice, that Cortland stared at him keenly.

"No, I did not exactly put them down to the sources you mention," he stammered awkwardly; "but——"

"It is my turn to tell you about the lady now," Max interrupted. "Know, then, that ten months ago she and I knelt side by side before the altar of Ashfold ap Zouche church; that she is Erroll Adair's cousin, and the purest and best of God's creatures."

"I *beg* your pardon, Vereker, upon my soul I do. I give you my word I had not the faintest idea you were a Benedict; of course, when a man is imbued with suspicion, he imagines all sorts of things that do not exist."

"Such as *abandon* and a *je ne sais quoi*," Max said bitterly. "True, and for that reason, I will forget all you have said, and bear no malice; here's my hand on it."

Cortland grasped it cordially, looking very much ashamed of himself.

"One thing, Vereker, and which may rather excuse my doubts about your marriage. Mrs. Adair *must* have known of it, yet when I hinted about the matter she never let drop an idea that such a being as Mrs. Vereker existed."

"She hates my wife," Max replied shortly,

"Well, you know, birds of a feather flock together," the duke said laughing. "So perhaps it is as well."

That evening Max caught the express train, and as the clock struck eleven he walked into the little sitting-room at the cottage.

Quita had not gone to bed. She sat at the table with one of Mudie's last fictions lying before her neglected. She started up when Max entered, and, with a bright smile, went up to him.

But he pushed her aside almost rudely, and flung himself on the sofa.

"Why are you sitting up?" he asked roughly.

His eyes looked rather wild, and his hands clasped together.

"Max, don't look at me like that!" she cried, in terror. "I believe you are going mad!"

Mad, that was it, he had gone mad, for does not Lavatar say that the jealous are possessed of a fierce mad devil? A fierce mad devil was in Max Vereker now, literally goading him on to tear bit by bit the soft pink flesh that Cortland's eyes had feasted on!

He could have done everything, anything, rather than have her face desecrated by a profane regard.

"Light o' love!" he almost screamed out passionately, his lips curling in scorn as he eyed her from head to foot.

Quita started then.

For the first time he saw the pretty soft lines go out of her face and hard ones took their place, the limpid loving eyes grew cold, the slight figure waxed almost queenly in its new-born dignity.

“What do you mean, Max?” she asked, in a low but distinct voice. “I have borne a good deal from you patiently, but there is a limit to everything. I have done nothing—*nothing* to excite your anger or contempt, and it is cruel and unmanly of you to treat me so!”

“You have done *nothing*! Listen to me. I have seen Cortland. I have heard from him *how* you received him; how you forgot who you were, and lavished smiles and looks upon a stranger whom you should have treated with the reserve of a lady. I have gone through an hour of torture such as, please God, I may never go through again in my life. I have

had to bear the horror of knowing that my wife, from her demeanour, was taken for one of the worst of her sex. So is it a marvel if I am gone mad? Would it be a marvel if I left you this very night, and thrust you out of my life as though you were a worthless glove, or a flower, whose bloom other hands have brushed?"

"Max!"

The poor child hardly understood the gist of his words, he had spoken them so fast and incoherently; and she was so bewildered and dazed by the torrent of passion.

"Well?"

"You forgot yourself, Max. You seem to forget that I am your *wife*."

"I *don't* forget you are my wife; that I have looked on you as an angel from heaven—as a supreme gift of God to make life worth clinging to. But *now*, after what I have heard——"

His voice broke, and his face softened

with the memory of all he *had* thought her; and, seeing that, Quita took heart.

“I have done nothing to forfeit your respect, Max. I never gave look or smile to the Duke of Cortland. He is nothing to me—nothing; but if you are only making excuses—if you are tired of me, Max, if your love has waxed—so small, *so small* that you can credit me with such dreadful, dreadful things, then let me go, Max. I can find ways to keep myself. I will never trouble you again! Only, before I go, say that you were wrong, Max, that you do not think me so bad, so——”

And a great sob broke from her.

He looked at her, and a great pity filled him.

She stood there, so little and white and fragile, her eyes glistening with tears, her mouth quivering, and her slim hands pressed down on her heart, as if to still the pain she felt there.

He remembered how some men talked—how they blew away a woman's reputation like a morsel of thistledown—how their vanity conjured up smiles and glances that had never been given them—that had never even existed.

“Tell me, Quita, as you hope for salvation—was I wrong in suspecting you of levity towards Cortland?”

“I talked to him about ‘Hermia,’ Max! I thought you would wish me to be civil to him, as he is going to buy your pictures.”

“And that was all? Did *he* say anything that he should not have said to you?”

“Nothing! All we said could be cried from the roof-top. Say you believe me, Max! don't let me go away without that to comfort me!”

“Comfort you! as if you would require comfort when we two parted!”

She looked up at him for an instant,

piteously, and he saw her turn as white as a lily.

“My love ! my love !” he cried, “why it would *kill* me, if we parted !”

And, without a word of reproach for all he had said before, she crept into his arms.

She was very pale, and there was a pained look in her eyes, but she smiled a little.





CHAPTER IX.

THE LEGEND OF "HERMIA."

"Yet, oh yet, thyself deceive not,
Love may sink by slow decay,
But by sudden wrench believe not
Hearts can thus be torn away.
All my faults perchance thou knowest,
All my madness none can know!"

"WHAT is it, little one? You look as if all the cares of the world were on your shoulders," Erroll said, rising from the seat he had taken on his entrance, and going over to one near his cousin. .

His visits to the cottage were pretty

frequent now, and, made on the score of close relationship, Max could not forbid them.

Quita sat, quiet and pale, her elbows resting on the sill, her hands supporting her chin, her large brown eyes fixed on a drifting fleet of small fleecy clouds. Habited in a close-fitting, plain black dress, she looked much thinner and more delicate than she had been wont to, and Erroll regarded her anxiously.

“Tell me, little one, are you unhappy?”

She started perceptibly, and looked up in his face. The old familiar face of her first love, with its Antinous beauty and ultramarine eyes; then, as suddenly she looked away again at the distant drifting clouds, her tongue seemed tied, her glance had a perplexed *distracte* expression.

With the warm radiance of the yellow sunlight, the little cottage wore quite a holiday aspect. And Phœbus, riding

rampant through the heavens, kissed Quita's cheeks into brown berries ; but she rested philosophically indifferent under the damaging of her complexion.

In the frame of mind she was in she infinitely preferred leaning upon that sill, and brooding *tant soit peu* gloomily over her future, to being ever so lovely and unfreckled. Her future promised to be so curiously chequered by light and shade, that it positively awed her to think of it.

Across the latticed windows bunches of roses trailed heavily, some of them as red as blood ; some of them saffron-hued, some white as milk with golden hearts. The trees on the southern wall were laden with luscious peaches and amber apricots, and clove-pinks and sweetbrier, with gilliflowers and mignonette, bloomed brightly in the miniature garden, with a myriad jewel-spangled butterflies skimming over their heads.

The drooping clusters of the barberry showed up like gold among the dark-green foliage. The rhododendron burnt like angry flames amidst the paler blossoms. Slim blue dragon-flies darted backwards and forwards, glancing like living gems against the white-washed walls, and a few long sprays of passion-flower hung from among the fragrant roses.

Quita shut her eyes dreamily.

For a moment the future and the present melted into thin air. Only the "past" lived, glowing, passionate, and full of life and love and hope; lived with a strong vitality that thrust all but itself from memory.

For a moment it seemed to her as though she were back once more at her dear old home at Queenscourt, with its sweet familiar scenes, its drooping trees, and blushing blossoms, its tangle of passion-flowers, and Erroll's face and voice hard by.

But only for a moment, a sweet and blissful moment, a regain of Paradise. In the next, she remembered that the past was a sealed book ; that in the present and the future she was *Max Vereker's wife!*

"Unhappy ! Why should you think I am unhappy ?" she asked lightly, forcing a sickly smile to her mouth.

"Because you look it," answered Erroll bluntly, keenly scrutinising the little white face that had grown up before him, and that he had learnt to read like a book, from its babyhood upwards. "Is Vereker good-tempered, Quita ?"

She started again, and reproached herself for having worn her heart on her sleeve, and thereby allowed the world, perhaps, to censure the man whom she had sworn on her knees to honour.

"*I* am bad-tempered, Erroll ; you and auntie did your best to spoil me, and my

nature was never inclined to be angelic, you know."

"I *don't* know about that," he replied, slowly and reflectively, gazing at her earnestly with the deep-blue eyes she knew so well. "Don't you remember, Quita, when you and I used to be so much together, before——"

"I remember *nothing* before the day I married Max," she interrupted hastily, with a little shiver; she was so afraid of reminiscences. "Never mind about me and my temper, Erroll; tell me a little about yourself. You seldom say a word about yourself. Is your wife in town or at Queenscourt?"

"At Queenscourt! Catch the charming Circe vegetating among the roses and cabbages whilst there's a soul left in Rotten Row. She can't live without Hurlingham and the Orleans Club. She must have a crowd of adorers; admiration

is hydrogen and oxygen, and meat and drink to her. She would die without a score of puppies 'at her feet, *curse them!*' and he gave a short bitter laugh that struck painfully.

"And it makes you unhappy, Erroll?"

"I'll swear it doesn't, *now*. When she and I first became one (we are two now), my existence was torture. I saw a rival in every fellow who happened to have tolerable nose, eyes, and mouth; but I am grown used to it all now, like the traditional eels. You don't know what it is to be married to a 'Professional Beauty.' My very identity is gone. I am only 'Mrs. Adair's husband,' a *thing* that exists to throw a mantle of respectability over her shoulders; while she receives princes, and dukes, and earls, who are what she calls in the jargon of to-day, too utterly utter; and I can't thrust her out of mind, for go where I will, 'Mrs. Adair' stares me in the face

from every shop-window in London. Look there," and he flung a packet of portraits on the sill. "I have been and sworn at the photographers time after time. But what's the good? Mrs. Adair 'sells' so well, you know."

Quita looked at the photographs of the woman who had spoilt her life for her, and "Mrs. Adair" looked back at her with her lovely odalisque eyes, and her form in every garb, both full dress and undress.

Erroll dashed them out of her hand, and flinging them *en masse* on the floor, stamped angrily upon them.

"There! don't sully your eyes with such things!" he said, contemptuously. "The woman bears my name, and that is *all*. Even poor old Queenscourt she has converted into an asylum for lunatics. She calls herself 'intense.' An absolute æsthete. And she has turned out all the old goods and chattels, which were 'vulgar' 'obsolete!'

save the mark! for what she calls 'high art,' and the 'snappiest' things in æstheticism—pomegranate wall papers, and sage-green dados, genuine Bottocellis and Pinturiccios, and old Nankin dragons. She dresses in peacock blue and faded yellow; has vague yearnings after the inner culture; and has rooted up all the flowers in the garden to fill it with sunflowers and daffodils. But I could forgive all this, if it were not for her promiscuous flirtations; but if she dares to draggle the good old name really in the mud, I believe I shall—*strangle her!*"

"Oh, Erroll!"

"I suppose you think me an awful brute for saying that. Yet I am sure Max would do the same by you!"

"I don't know! Max is very noble and unselfish," she said bravely.

"Is he? Well, I don't pretend to the nobility and magnanimity of Max, you see!"

She flushed crimson, and he noticed it.

"Do you know, I don't quite believe in your rose-and-honey existence, little one! A bird told me the other day, that Vereker gave it to you hot about your little affair with Cortland!"

He had really heard nothing of Max's scene with Quita, but simply imagined there had been one.

"Max had ample cause to be angry at my concealing the Duke of Cortland's visit."

"I wish I had been here when Cortland came prying about, I believe I should have horsewhipped him! I am your legitimate protector, Quita."

"No, Max is!"

"And how, pray, can Max protect you against *himself*?" he asked meaningly.

She was silent for a minute, then she looked him full in the face.

"I would never allow anyone to interfere between Max and me! not even if he——"

"Threatened to murder you! I quite believe that. You are such a dear, good, loyal little thing, so different to your sex. By Jove, they *are* bad! some of them! Oh, Quita! men are such thorough-paced idiots, they never know what they sow until they reap. And when they can reach heaven, go, like a pack of obstinate fools, in quest of a place which in polite society must be nameless. Sometimes I could shoot myself, when I look back and recollect *what is*, and *what might have been!*"

"Recalling pleasant reminiscences?" asked Max, walking quietly into the room, with his eyes fixed on two bright spots of colour that burned feverishly on his wife's usually pale cheeks. "Quita looks quite excited over the interesting theme."

He was as white as a sheet, and the shade of his blonde moustache could not hide an uncontrollable quiver of his under lip.

But he went up straightway to the

window and laid his hand on Quita's shoulder.

She felt it tremble; and, with a sudden impulse, she leant her head back against him, and, catching his fingers, kissed them. And Max, in the magic of that kiss, forgetting everything and everybody, stooped and pressed his lips to hers.

"By Jove! quite a little love idyll," cried Erroll, with a sharp ring of envy and jealousy in his tone; "I feel quite out in the cold. Quita grudges me a cousinly embrace now and hardly vouchsafes even a conventional shake-paw; but I always return good for evil."

He glanced at the rebellious colour flaming up in her face; and, plucking a spray of passion-flower, offered it to her with mock gallantry.

"It is lovely; but purple suits Mrs. Adair better than it suits me. I am so pale," murmured Quita, with a feeble

attempt at *nonchalance*. The episode of the passion-flower brought back the old times so vividly, that it made her sick and dizzy as she stood there between the first love and the husband.

"You are far from pale *now*," observed Max pointedly. "And the passion-flower will suit you *à merveille*. I will leave Adair to advise its adjustment."

He went out of the room, shutting the door behind him, but not before Quita had caught sight of his pained expression.

Unhinged and upset, she fell on her knees; and, bowing her head on the window-sill, a low sob broke from her.

The sound of that sob was too much for Erroll. In a moment he was bending over her, his hand softly caressing the tangled waves of the bright chestnut hair his soul in a horrible tumult of pity, and passion, and regret, and love.

Ay! love for Max Vereker's wedded wife!

He realised fully in that moment that she was the one woman in all the wide, wide world for him. He realised in that moment that from that day forth he should love her with the wild overwhelming passion with which she had loved him in the days gone by, *with which she surely loved him now!*

For

“By sudden wrench believe not
Hearts can thus be torn away,”

says the poet, and Erroll thought so with him.

“Don’t cry, for God’s sake, my darling,” he whispered, in the old, sweet, soft voice, that had been used to dry her tears as soon as they fell. “Don’t cry, for it cuts me to the heart! I was a ruffian to have raked up old times. I was a fiend to have reminded you of the past! I think of it bitterly enough myself; but the knowledge

that *you* regret, makes the burden doubly hard to bear."

Quita rose quietly from her knees, and dashed the tears impatiently from her cheeks.

"I *don't* regret!" she cried stoutly. "And *you*, Erroll—don't you regret! but make the very best of your life. Max loves me; and while he loves me, I cannot but be happy and content!"

"And do you love Max as well as you once loved me?" Erroll whispered eagerly.

The flowers blushed on, the butterflies sipped their sweets, the blue dragon-flies darted backwards and forwards, and the sun shone out brighter than ever.

Quita did not answer.

She looked as if she was in a trance, standing there with loose-clasped hands, and broad white lids hiding her eyes.

"I shall never be happy nor content again!" cried Erroll passionately. "Quita! my little Quita! *don't* you pity me when I

say that? And yet, amidst all the bitterness I must know, there is one bright spot in my existence to look back upon; one little green oasis standing out in the desert of my life. Can you guess what it is?—or shall I tell you?”

She *would* not, or else she could not speak, and averted her face from him; while the yellow sun began to sink lower and lower, touching her hair with a pale cold gleam, and the air came chilly through the clustering roses.

But she was not as indifferent as she seemed. Erroll's voice—the voice of the man who had first taught her the meaning of the word “love,” could not fail to move her. And now, somehow, it sounded almost like a dirge in her ears, as it spoke of bitterness and regret—a dirge for the poor dead past.

If she could have done so, knowing Max would think no ill, she would have comforted

and soothed this lover of her girlhood, as fondly and purely as a mother soothes her child.

"You must look at me while I tell you!" persisted Erroll, in his old imperious fashion—yielding to the demon of vanity that prompted him to probe the wound he had made, and to glorify himself on the breadth and width and depth of it.

She obeyed—and looked at him with great, frank, brown eyes—frank and fearless, from their innocence of evil.

"That oasis in my life is one evening—an evening just like this—one little year ago! The shadows were falling around; but there was one bright star shining, and by its light I saw—— Quita! are you listening?"

Her face was turned towards him. Her eyes rested lovingly, dreamily upon him, and she was far away—away in the past which she had tried to bury out of sight.

"Are you listening, my snowflake?" he repeated softly, and the sobriquet sent a thrill through her frame.

She bent her head in assent.

"By the light of that star I saw a little white face—a sweet, lovely face, with tender, faithful eyes, like a dog's, and a mouth piteous and quivering like a child's. I saw that face come nearer and nearer; the slender arms clung round my neck; two red lips clung close to mine. Oh, God! when I think of it! when I remember all I gave up for a heartless woman, who vouchsafes a stone when I ask for bread—a false, worthless coquette, who has cursed my life, I feel as if I should go mad—stark staring mad—for the dolt, the fool I was."

Whilst he was speaking, Quita had dropped on a seat, her limbs trembling; but when he ceased she rose up. She staggered a little and caught at the window. Her face was pale as death, and her eyes,

their large dark pupils dilated, wore the same hunted look that he had seen in them on that very evening of which he had spoken.

Suddenly she threw an affrighted glance round the room. Was Max by hazard within earshot of all that had passed? Poor Max, whom she had forgotten! The very thought made her shiver like an autumn leaf. Then she went up to Erroll; and, laying her hand on his arm, looked up imploringly in his face.

"For my sake—for the sake of the past, never speak to me again like that! I was mad to listen, but I could not help it; I was wicked to forget; but it all came surging—surging over me, the memory of *that* time. God forgive me, for having forgotten the fealty I owe to Max!"

"Max! Max! it's always *Max*," cried Erroll angrily, seizing her hands and keeping her a prisoner face to face. "Because

I was mad enough not to know my own mind ; because out of pride and pique you chose to marry another man, am I to be thrust right out of your life ? Have you no pity, no feeling to give me ? Are both our lives to be sacrificed to a miserable sense of duty, to the horrible injustice of fate, that has divided our hands but not our hearts ? For you love me, Quita. Don't *dare* to deny it. I see it in your face, in your dear eyes ; they *cannot* tell a lie. You have loved me with heart and soul all through, you will love me till your dying day. For God's sake tell me it *is* so ; let me have the comfort of knowing that I do not idolise you in vain ; that you care for me, feel for me, pity me ! Only once ! only once ! put your arms round my neck, and your lips to mine, as you did that evening !”

It was a terrible temptation.

Erroll stood before her, his handsome face quivering with passion, his blue eyes

looking into her own, his hands clasping hers.

"Though our lives must drift apart,
I shall love thee best,"

he had said, and it had come to pass. That woman with all her beauty had failed to take him right away. He was wretched in his married life; he hated the woman who had come between them; he *wanted* pity, and sympathy, and love! And only a very little while ago he had been all the world to her; one word, one touch, one little caress, would do him good! Just for once they could harm nobody!

She wavered, she grew cold as ice, she glanced at the face that had caught her young heart.

Her mouth trembled, her eyes grew feverishly bright, and she flung up her arms towards him.

Then they fell nervelessly down without

touching him, and, without a word, she turned and crept away to her own room, humiliated, ashamed, self-scorning.

Erroll stood amazed and motionless as a statue of stone for the space of five minutes, then a bitter smile crossed his lips.

By-and-by, with the privilege of a relative, he sauntered quietly into the studio, whistling a popular opera-bouffe air.

Max glanced at him, then went on quietly mixing his paints. The light was waning fast, and under it both men looked curiously white and wan.

“‘Hermia’ progresses rapidly, Vereker. What an exquisite face you have given her,” remarked Erroll, intently regarding the picture.

“It is my wife’s face,” answered Max shortly.

“So I see ; but only as her face was. Quita looks dreadfully ill and out of spirits

now. All the bloom and the dash of girlhood have gone out of her."

"She has been making you her father confessor, I suppose," said Max, in a low voice, assiduously painting.

"A jealous man sleeps dog's sleep," and so Max began forthwith to draw his own conclusions from the long *tête-à-tête* between his wife and her old lover, and watched for further proof of that which made his existence gall and wormwood.

"No, if she has anything to confide she has not taken me into her confidence," replied Erroll carelessly, as he rolled up a cigarette and lit it. "But I have been thinking that a change might benefit her. This part of the country is supposed to be rather damp and enervating, and Quita was never strong even as a child, you know. In fact, there is consumption on her mother's side, Vereker. My dear fellow, I want you to remember that we are

connections, and that therefore any little offer I make cannot be thought an insult. You see, you are not over flush of cash; I have a great deal more than I want, and it would give me immense gratification if you would take any amount necessary for your idea of running over to the West Indies for the proofs you are anxious to secure. It would be a good thing to regain your property and income as soon as possible, if it is only that your wife might have more comfort than Surbiton can give her."

"I don't fancy a voyage at this time of the year would do for Quita," replied Max, beginning to feel grateful.

His suspicions after all, he thought, must be unfounded, since the man so deliberately offered to place impediments in the way of meeting Quita, and Max grew angry with himself for his doubts.

"No; I am *sure* a voyage would not suit her at all. She looks as fragile as a lily,

poor child, and so quiet and depressed ; but you could leave her with the greatest confidence with my mother. I will undertake to arrange that part comfortably, and my mother will be only too pleased to have her back again at Queenscourt."

Max had an energetic fit of work on him at the moment ; so energetic that his brush nearly dashed out one of "Hermia's" brown eyes.

He flushed deeply as Erroll spoke, and before he replied stooped to pick up his palette.

And the clock ticked loud, making the silence of the room doubly palpable.

"I thank you very much," Max said after a while, calling up as much warmth as he was able into his tones ; but, in spite of himself, there was a harsh ring in them. "But I could not borrow money even from my wife's—*cousin* ! And, besides, Quita would not like my leaving her."

He looked keenly at Erroll with the last words ; and when he saw the crimson colour that mounted over his face, he quietly turned away and fell to painting again.

“What are you crowning ‘Hermia’ with ?” asked Erroll carelessly, to hide an awkward embarrassment of feeling that had stolen over him.

“Passion-flowers.”

Erroll started.

“Passion-flowers ? — but why ? Is it because they are Quita’s pet flowers ?”

Max shook his head.

“I did not know that my wife *ever* cared for them ; but then, you see, I am really a much greater stranger to her than yourself. You have seen so much of her that you must know her tastes and fancies as well as she knows them herself.”

Again the red blood swept over Erroll’s fair skin, and the words did not come readily to his lips.

Max smiled ; a little smile that had a world of bitterness in it.

"Don't you know the legend of 'Hermia'?" he asked after a minute or so.

"No."

"Then I'll tell it you. Have some sherry or anything?"

"No, thanks!"

"Hermia was a lovely nymph, who loved a Greek. The Greek should have been a Mormon, for he made love to her, but made love to scores of other women as well. We all do that, you will say, so that Lycellius was only like his sex. He sported with poor Hermia's heart ; he gathered the first fresh kisses from her virgin lips ; he knew that her *soul* was full of him ; and then he let her drop out of his life like a withered flower. But we all do that sort of thing, don't we?"

Erroll lay back in his arm-chair, and was so busy sending up big blue rings of smoke

towards the ceiling, that he did not answer.

“Hermia lived—a life that was really death, so dead was she to all and everything but Lycellius the false. At last she forgot him in the grave, and Lycellius planted passion-flowers upon it. ‘I’ll crown her with these in death, since in life I bereft her of love,’ he said; and then he turned away, and thought no more of the heart he had gained and flung away. Stupid little legend; but Cortland had a fancy for it, and ‘Hermia’ is ‘to order.’”

“But your wife’s face is not to order,” cried Erroll, with a great thrill of jealousy in his breast. “I wouldn’t have her face hung up in Cortland’s room for all those fellows’ profane eyes to stare at, for all the money in Christendom.”

“No more would I,” said Max quietly, “so here goes,” and, taking a knife, he cut the canvas rapidly into strips. Then he

stood and gazed at the *débris* of several months' hard work.

"Cortland was to give me two hundred for it; I shall have to borrow from you, after all, to go to Jamaica."

"With all my heart. By Jove, what a thousand pities! You might have let me have that picture. I would have willingly given you double the sum for it. Being a relative, it wouldn't have mattered my having it."

Max glanced at him.

"I don't know about that," he answered, a little pointedly; "but I dare say the original will be better worth looking at; so if Quita likes, we can arrange about her staying at her old quarters at Queenscourt while I am absent——"

"Where?" interrupted Quita, entering the room noiselessly.

"In Jamaica."

"Oh, shall we go to Jamaica, Max?"

she cried eagerly, her face flushing with pleasure, for she had always longed to revisit her birthplace, and the graves of her father and mother.

“*I shall.*”

She slid down on the floor by his side, and looked up in his face.

“Where you go, I shall go,” she said determinedly. “Max, what has happened to ‘Hermia’?”

“I have cut her up into little bits, sooner than let her fall into other hands, my child,” he answered gravely, with a meaning look.

Her face fell.

“You surely did not want Cortland to have your picture, Quita?” Max cried suspiciously.

“Yes, I did. How else can we pay our voyage?” she replied frankly as a child, and her face cleared at once.

"Adair has offered to lend me the wherewithal."

"Has he?" she exclaimed; and she looked gratefully at Erroll. How good of him, she thought, how noble and unselfish; he had surely done it from a pure desire to put himself, and perhaps *her*, out of temptation.

"And he wants to increase the obligation by taking upon himself the charge of my wife while I am away!"

She looked down, a cloud passed over her face, and a dash of hectic colour dyed her cheeks. She looked as Erroll had said, as fragile as a lily—and Max was startled.

"Adair thinks you look ill, and require better nursing than I can give you. *Are you ill, Quita?*"

He stooped and examined her features feverishly—his heart beating fast with a

new-born fear—for he loved her, loved her more than his own life.

“Ill! no,” and she laughed a careless ringing laugh, just as women laugh when they would far rather weep.

“Are you out of spirits?”

“Never, when *you* are happy, Max,” she whispered softly, while Erroll stood at the other end of the studio, whistling and looking out of the window, but with a war of feelings that he scarcely understood himself.

Max patted his wife’s head as it rested against his knee. “Good little girl!” he said, with a forced smile. “You try to do your duty to the letter, but how about the spirit? I don’t want you, unless I have body and soul and heart, although, if I *knew* that you loved me as I love you, life would be heaven!”

“I must be off, Vereker,” cried Erroll, coming towards them, and for half a second

he looked straight into Quita's eyes. She shuddered, and her lids drooped, while her hands grew cold as ice.

"Good-bye, Quita, or, rather, *au revoir*," Erroll said, with emphasis.

"Good-bye," she answered lightly; but her pulse throbbed, and she averted her face.

"You will think over the matter of staying at the old house, while Vereker is away, won't you? My mother would take such care of you, and be so glad to have her child back again."

"And you would enjoy being amongst your old haunts again. It will really be the best arrangement, for you don't look strong enough for the roughing you would have with me," Max broke in, trying to be unselfish.

"I should be wretched," flashed Quita, with an impetuosity unusual to her, "and, being wretched, should make everyone around me so."

"But why?" asked Max gently.

"Because *you* would be away, of course," Erroll said, with a little unpleasant smile that had a sneer in it. "Don't you know, where the treasure is there will the heart be also, Vereker? Quita wants to spare us the soul-rending spectacle of pining love, and I honour her for it."

"And so do I," responded Max gravely, in a low tone.

When Erroll was fairly gone, Quita went and put her arms round her husband's neck.

"Why do you want to get rid of me, Max?"

He did not attempt to answer her, but she caught his eyes.

"Let us go to Jamaica, or anywhere, Max. We shall be ten times happier when we are quite away from all who know us. We shall be all in all to each other then."

Max touched her forehead with his lips, then he put her gently aside.

"She wants to have the sea between her and temptation, poor child," he thought, as he tossed the fragments of "Hermia" into the waste-basket.

Meanwhile, moody and miserable, wroth with himself, with Quita, and with all the world, "Mrs. Adair's husband" journeyed back to his uncongenial home. His deep blue eyes wore an angry look, his mouth was set sullenly, and every now and then a dark frown gathered on his white forehead.

"That stupid little legend of 'Hermia' haunts me horribly," he muttered. "Poor little darling, my poor little sacrificed love! Why on earth should Vereker have taken her face for that confounded picture? Those passion-flowers too. My cursed infatuation for *that* woman has ruined my life! 'I'll crown her with these in death, since in

life I bereft her of love !' Oh ! if Quita should die, I should think myself a murderer !"

Just as these thoughts ran through his mind, there came a great splattering of mud, a flash of four handsome roans, and a—laugh.

A ringing laugh, with not much harmony in it, but plenty of hardness and mockery.

Erroll looked up, then turned quickly away with a scowl.

It was the Earl of Fitzflutes' drag on its way back from Hurlingham, and on the box-seat was Mrs. Adair, in a *ravis-sante* toilette of palest daffodil silk, with a Liliputian stork in her hat, and a pomegranate parasol. Lord Wortlebury, sitting close behind, was whispering in her ear ; whilst Cortland, that fast young baronet, Lental Kane, a superb but rapid peeress,

and one or two other congenial spirits, occupied the centre.

"So," muttered Erroll between his set teeth, "she has nearly got to the top rung of the ladder, but will never rest content until the very highest in the land are at her feet. What does it matter to her if I am the laughing-stock of every cad about town? What the deuce does she care if she draggles the good old name through the mire? so long as the false glare and glitter of a Professional Beauty's life surround her? I'll let her have the bit between her teeth and go where she likes. Who knows but some fool of a lordling may rid me of her, and—joy go with him!"

This was the value Mrs. Adair's husband put upon her and the marvellous beauty that all town had gone mad over.



CHAPTER X.

A JEALOUS MAN SLEEPS DOG'S SLEEP.

"Of all our passions—I wonder nature made
The worst, foul jealousy, her favourite !
And, if it be not so, why took she care
That everything should give the monster nourishment?"

"If you have any doubt that your wife
still loves her cousin, go to Morley's Hotel,
Trafalgar Square, between twelve and three
to-morrow."

Max turned this anonymous document
over and over ; but though he suspected
from whence it came, he had no proof.
His good angel prompted him to fling the
paper into the fire, but his evil genius
stayed his hand, and the few cruel words

seemed to have a weird fascination for his eyes.

Hearing his wife's step on the stairs, he dropped the note into his pocket, and when she entered the room, she found him sitting at the head of the breakfast-table, moody and silent, while he pushed away his plate impatiently.

"Anything the matter, Max?" she asked gently, after watching the shadow on his brow.

He averted his face quickly without answering; then he looked at her and muttered:

"Nothing!"

Hurt and perplexed, she managed to keep back a few refractory tears that still shone on her lashes, but a little hopeless, helpless sort of sigh escaped her involuntarily, and she moved away to the window.

He noted then how painfully fragile she

had grown. In a second his sweet nature reasserted itself, his eyes and his lips softened.

"Forgive my bad temper," he said penitently; "I am very vexed, and——"

He paused.

"And what, Max?"

"Never mind; it's no use discussing things, it does not seem to right them. I wonder if you would promise me something, Quita?"

"Of course, I would promise anything—everything," she cried eagerly. "You have only to ask, Max, and you know I shall say, 'Yes.'"

He walked up to her, and patted her cheek absently, his eyes abstracted, and his lips twitching as if his thoughts were not pleasant ones.

"Tell me, Quita, do you really care about me?"

"Max! Max! why will you doubt me so?" she asked in a weary little voice, that touched him infinitely.

She was standing, leaning against the casement, her hands toying idly with a rose which she had gathered, and her eyes lifted up to the sky with a good deal of sadness in their depths.

He looked at her wistfully; how pretty she was with her long curling lashes, and small Greek profile, and pure lily-white skin.

"How can I marvel?" he murmured in a low tone, but she caught the sentence.

"At what?" she asked, regarding him in surprise.

Max was more strange in his manner than usual that morning.

"Why, how can I marvel if men go mad over a face like yours? Quita! you have a sweet face, a lovely face—but is it a *true* face—say?"

He caught her slim wrists, and hurt her; but, like a brave child, she did not even wince. If it did him good to hurt her—poor fellow—she knew she could bear it. Two eyes, blue as sapphires, were searching her through and through, but she had nothing to conceal from him. She and God alone knew how valiantly she had struggled and fought against that other love of the bygone time. How true and loyal she always meant to be to the man whom she had sworn on her bended knees to hold to till death.

And no matter what came, she felt that she would never perjure herself so long as she lived.

“What on earth can I do to prove to you that I am not false, Max?” she asked meekly, for it never entered her head to be angry or defiant. Max was her husband; and, if there were one or two specks in his nature, one or two weaknesses in his

character, she was not there to be his judge.

Still, in spite of her truth, Max did not believe in her, although it killed him to doubt.

The morsel of paper that some fiend had sent rustled in his pocket, and seemed whispering to him : " Try her ! try her ! and she'll be found wanting ! "

" I am going out," he said brusquely ; " don't wait dinner for me, I may be back early or late ; " and, without vouchsafing another word, he went up to the side-table and took his hat.

Quita watched him with a sinking heart.

" Won't you kiss me before you go, Max ; and see, I have a rosebud for your coat. "

He stopped, then suddenly drew himself to his full height, without touching the lips she held up.

" Pshaw ! we have been married much too long for any nonsense or sentiment,

child, and I don't care for flowers. I am not a 'fancy man.' Good-bye and take care of yourself," he said in a hard cynical tone.

"Please don't leave me without a kiss, Max. Something may happen to me in your absence, and then you would be sorry you had not kissed me; and what was it you asked me to promise you?"

"Nothing!"

"Yes, yes! you wanted some promise—I promise now, even before I know what you want."

"Do you? But suppose if you couldn't keep your promise? Suppose anyone else's influence was too strong? What then?"

"Anyone else's influence? No one has any influence over me except you, Max."

"Will you swear that you will stick to me through thick and thin? Will you swear that you will never leave me for another man?"

She did not answer.

For the first time a little rebellious feeling crept up in her heart. It was so hard—so hard—to be doubted like this without reason; when, too, she had, during the ten months of her married life, devoted each hour to Max, and Max only.

“You cannot answer for yourself, Quita,” he flashed out impetuously, “or, perhaps, you will *not* answer. Well, well, it is not your fault, after all; we two made a horrible mistake in marrying. I was so much older; I ought to have died before I bound you in a hateful tie, which nothing can break but death or sin. Do you hear, Quita? Nothing can break but death or—*sin!*”

Still she said not a word, but hid her face against the clustering leaves.

So Max moved a little and stood with his arms crossed on his breast, and spoke slowly and deliberately:

“When you know that a man is hungering and thirsting for one word of love and reassurance, as wildly and feverishly as a man searches for water in a desert, you are silent; when you *must* feel that life is death to me in the uncertainty of your real feelings, you yet keep them locked in your bosom; you put a seal upon your lips! You are thinking what an error you have made—how much happier you would have been as Erroll Adair’s wife!”

The suddenness of his words sent a thrill through her heart; but she remembered.

“Max! Erroll is another woman’s husband, and I—I really think you forget that I am your wife.”

She felt aggrieved and humiliated by his distrust. She who had thrust temptation bravely from her but one short week back, and with Erroll’s eyes, and lips, and clasp, all within her reach—had won a signal victory over herself.

"Remember *that!* Remember always that you *are* my wife!" muttered Max.

"I am not very likely to let the fact escape my memory," she answered gravely. "I look on Erroll as I look on any other man. He is nothing to me, save a relative, who befriended me when I was left alone in the world. As far as *love* is concerned, Erroll is as much removed from me as though he or I were *dead!*"

"Tush!" he broke in roughly; "don't think all that goody-goody sentiment is a safeguard for errant fancies. Morality, nowadays, is at a low ebb, and marital obligations go a very little way against inclinations; certainly where *men* are concerned. On your honour, Quita, if you were free, don't you believe Adair would marry you to-morrow, if he could?"

"I have not thought about it," she replied, truthfully enough; "but why on earth torture yourself and me like this,

Max? Listen to me, dear," and she wound her pretty white arms round him. "I would marry you to-morrow over again, suspicion and all; for when you *are* nice there is no one like you in the whole, whole world."

He smiled, the smile that always changed his face to the handsome fascinating Max of courting days; and, stooping, he gave her the parting kiss she had asked for, while she adjusted the rosebud in his buttonhole.

He had not been gone ten minutes before a telegram was put into her hand, purporting to come from Mrs. Adair, and bidding her be at Morley's Hotel by ten o'clock.

"Auntie is ill and they don't care to frighten me. I wish Max was here to go with me," Quita said, half aloud.

In half an hour she was in a cab.

"Drive fast to the station or I shall be late for the 1.10 train to town," she

ordered hastily ; and, sitting back, a few tears trickled down her cheeks, she felt a curious presentiment of evil, and each mile nearer her destination seemed to increase the feeling.





CHAPTER XI.

ANGUIS IN HERBA.

“Thinkest thou there are no serpents in the world
But those who slide along the grassy sod,
And sting the luckless foot that presses them?
There are those in the path of social life
Do bask their spotted skins in fortune’s sun,
And slay the soul !”

“Is Mrs. Adair at home?” asked Quita hurriedly and incoherently.

“Yes, ma’am. Will you walk up?”

She obeyed, mounting the broad flights of stairs in the wake of a servant, who threw open the door of Room 22. A big room, solidly furnished, but, after the

manner of hotel rooms, lacking a look of comfort.

Room 22 was empty ; and, left alone, she paced up and down impatiently, feeling nervous without any tangible cause.

Ten minutes passed by laggingly, and then a sound of footsteps echoed in the long corridor.

Quita listened.

Then rushing to the door, she pulled it open.

There she stood face to face with—Erroll.

“Quita!” he cried in surprise. “What is the matter? What have you come to me for?”

Quita could not speak, she only shrunk back, silently gazing at him.

There was nothing in his manner or look to offend, yet she evidently felt alarmed.

Erroll caught her hand, and drawing her into the room, closed the door. Then he put her, passive, nerveless, into an easy-

chair, and threw himself on his knees by her side.

Her eyes wore such a startled look, her face was so white, that he fancied she had some terrible news to relate.

"Speak to me, little one," he said softly. "What has happened? What has brought you here?"

She regarded him keenly for a moment; but her scrutiny was not satisfactory, for she shut her eyes for a moment, and turned several shades whiter than before. Her hands, cold as ice, lay in his grasp; her lips trembled perceptibly.

Then a thought struck Erroll.

Well, he was neither better nor worse than his sex, so he could hardly be censured that such a thought came to him.

Only a week or two before he had told her that he loved her, and had prayed her to give him love in return. She had

refrained from temptation then ; but women were weak.

Had she found her heart *plus fort* than herself, and come to him ?

Had Quita left Max, and come to her old love after all ? Quick as lightning these thoughts flashed through his brain, and his face grew positively radiant in the rapture of his belief. He threw an arm round the slight form that seemed to yield to his embrace.

“Have you repented your cruelty and coldness to me, Quita ?” he whispered.

She did not answer. She sat there like a petrified image ; her eyes fixed upon him, and he believed that the step she had taken had terrified her almost out of her senses.

“Don’t look like that, Quita—speak to me. Is it true that you have come to me ? that you *feel* we two belong to each other ; that other ties are nought in comparison to our mighty love ? Oh my darling, tell me

it is so, and I'll bless you for the happiness you bring !”

“Is auntie here?” she said at last, in a low voice.

“My mother? No; she is at Queens-court, and Circe is with her. Morley's is my bachelor abode, you know.”

“I *didn't* know,” she faltered. “Erroll, there is some horrible mistake. Some incomprehensible mystery! I never expected to see *you* here.”

“Never expected to see *me* here?” he questioned in a crestfallen voice, rising from his knees. “Then why on earth did you come?”

Quita trembled from head to foot.

“Everything seems to go against me; Max will never believe I am innocent if he finds I have been here.”

She burst into a torrent of tears, and covered her face with her hands.

“Don't cry, little one, don't cry,” he

implored, bending over her. "I will sift this matter and find out the authors of the mischief, if there be any. Yet what harm can there be in your coming to see me, after all? We are cousins, almost brother and sister in the world's eyes; *that we are more to one another we two only know!*"

His voice dropped at his last words, but she heard them, and a bright pink flush swept over her cheeks.

"I received a telegram bidding me to come here to-day. Did *you* send it?" she said, regarding him intently; but he was not guilty.

"A telegram? No. Much as I like you to be here, alone in my rooms, where at least we can talk without the Argus eyes of the *sposo* upon us, I never dared to dream of such pleasure. But now that you *are* here forget everything, everybody for a little while except *me*, Quita."

He threw his arm again round her as he knelt by the easy-chair, he clasped her hand, and his handsome eyes, doubly handsome in emotion, dwelt softly on her face.

"Who sent that telegram, Erroll?" she said, so engrossed in the subject that she never heeded his embrace or look at the moment.

"Could it have been Circe? She hates you!"

"Why?"

"Because she liked Max Vereker."

"But he did not care for her."

"I don't know so much about that. You see, they were together a good deal in Italy; and the dog Cara, whom she pets more than anything else, was given to her by him. I found out that they had been great cronies from Warner, who is a brainless sieve."

"And did he say Max had liked her?"

"Yes; but let us talk of ourselves, darling. Do you know, you cruelly disappointed me the other day?"

"How?" she asked absently, her thoughts with Max and the woman he had liked.

"You came close to me, as close as you are now. You put your arms up, and I thought I should feel them once more like this."

And he quietly put her arm round his neck.

The touch startled her. She drew back to the farthest limit of the huge fauteuil—her cheeks aflame, her lips trembling. Then she rose quietly, and went towards the door.

"I cannot trust you, Erroll!" she said quietly, but with the big tears shining in her eyes.

In a moment he was beside her, penitent in word and regard.

"You *can* trust me, little one ! I promise I will never touch you, or say one word that you can blame, if you will forgive me this once."

She shook her head.

"I have no *friend* in the world but auntie and you, Erroll," she said pitifully.

"I understand," he answered, "and will never offend you again !"

"You could not *offend* me, Erroll ! But——" she hesitated, and her eyes fell.

"I know ! you want me to help you to be good, dear ! And so I will—please God. I'll keep guard over myself, and never forget that you are the sweetest, purest little woman that ever lived. Won't you shake hands on our compact ?"

She held out her hand with a bright smile on her lips.

And Erroll, taking it, bestowed on the slender fingers as respectful a salute as Sir Charles Grandison could have given.

A slight knock came at the door, but they never heard it; then the door opened, and Max Vereker walked in.

For an instant the trio stood silent.

Then Max went up to his wife.

"You here!" he said, between his set teeth. There was a lurid glare in his eyes, and his figure swayed like a reed. "You here!" he repeated, catching Quita's slim wrist in an iron vice.

Then Erroll, with the spring of a wild beast, wrenched her out of her husband's grasp.

"You look like *murder*," he said in a concentrated voice to Max. "Do you think I'll stand by and see this?"

"I *feel* like murder," answered Max in a slow, deliberate voice, "and I thank you to leave my wife to me, to deal with her as I think fit."

"I am Quita's nearest relative; and so help me God I'll never see her bullied and

made miserable by any man living!" flashed Erroll. "Come to me, Quita; you shall not be left to the mercy of a madman, if he were ten times your husband."

"Come to *me*, Quita," said Max in a low, firm voice; and she went up to him and slipped her hand into his, trembling like a leaf, but brave in her loyalty.

Max glanced at Erroll and laughed—a laugh with a mockery of mirth in it.

"So you are not bold enough yet to flaunt your love for another man before my face, whatever you do in my absence. Why did you come here?"

Quita stood before him. Her little head erect, her brown eyes grand and brave.

"I came here because auntie sent me a telegram, Max. That's all."

"Auntie sent a telegram?" he mimicked, with a sneer, "then why is not 'auntie' here?"

"The telegram was evidently a trick."

"But it gained you a *tête-à-tête* with your old lover."

"Erroll was never my lover!" Quita said firmly.

"No; but he knew you would be his at the asking," sneered Max once more.

She turned as white as a sheet, and tottered to a seat.

"By Jove, this is more than flesh and blood can stand!" cried Erroll, frantic with rage. "Quita, can you, and will you, allow this man to insult you like this? Throw duty to the four winds and leave him. The world will not blame you for refusing to live with a lunatic who has no respect for your delicacy or your feelings."

Max strode up to the couch where she sat, and stood facing her.

"You hear what he says. He has been your oracle through life, obey him now! Leave me to my miserable fate; I am a

penniless, homeless, nameless wretch, and a curse to any woman who loved me and shared my lot. Go back to your old home, to wealth and luxury, and I'll never trouble you more. You can crush me out of your life, like a miserable insect that has crawled at your feet; and soon, I pray God, my death will leave you free!"

"Max! Max!"

She was down on the floor before him. She had caught his hands, and her eyes looked up into his wistfully, lovingly.

"Quita, where is your pride?" asked Erroll angrily. "I won't allow him to influence you by dramatic speeches. I insist on your reflecting over all that has passed, before you make up your mind as to your future life."

"No one must interfere between Max and me," she said quietly. "He knows that I shall not leave him, that I forgive all he has said in a moment of anger. Max, you

will come home now? And when you are cooler, you will tell me that your words were like the wind, which passes away."

She rose, and drawing down her veil, put her arm through his, and drew him out of the room.

Then Erroll threw himself on the couch she had left. The impress of her figure was still on the velvet cushion she had leant against, and her handkerchief lay on the floor. Catching it up, he pressed it over and over again to his lips.

"My darling! my poor little darling! and it is I who drove her into that mad-man's arms. I, who would give all I have in this world, to blot out the hateful present, and recall the blessed past!"



CHAPTER XII.

STRANGERS YET.

“ Will it ever more be thus,
Spirits still impervious ;
Shall we never firmly stand,
Soul to soul and hand to hand ;
Are the fates for ever set,
That we must be strangers yet ? ”

THE sun dropped lower and lower to westward, and the air came slow and fragrant with the breath of homely flowers. The birds had gone to sleep in their green nests, and the roses drooped against the casement, faint from Phœbus' kisses. The amber light fell pale, and dim, and chastened through the tangle of leaves and blossoms,

and all nature seemed stilled into ineffable peace and rest.

Except the hearts of the two within the little Surbiton cottage.

Quita stood by the window, white and trembling, with a scared look in her eyes, and Max had thrown himself into a chair, with a straggling sunbeam falling full upon his face.

What a face it was—haggard and set, and even old-looking in that hour.

“Are you ill, Max?” cried his wife, forgetting all that had passed in the look on his features.

“Ill—no, but—wretched!”

She carried a footstool to where he sat; and, kneeling on it, she took both his cold hands into hers, and looked up into his eyes, whose gaze was fixed on her.

“Max, for Heaven’s sake don’t look like that!” she whispered. “Be yourself, dear. Here, in our own home, with no

one by, we can talk over everything quietly."

"Quietly!" he cried hoarsely, wrenching his hands away from her soft pink palms. "Oh God! oh God! can such things really be? Is fidelity only a miserable sham? Are love and faith but mockeries? Is life nothing—*nothing* but a dream; women but cheats?"

"Hush, hush! Max! I do so want this dreadful state of things to cease! I am weary—so weary of it all, I want to——"

"You want to leave me!" he almost shouted, rising and flinging up his arms frantically. "You want to leave me, *of course* you do! Erroll Adair advised it, and his words must be obeyed! I knew you would abide by his judgment and thrust me out of your life as soon as you could!"

"Max—Max! you do me injustice by such thoughts. I wouldn't leave you,

Max, not if you put me out with your own hands. I should come back to you *somehow*, dear. I am not beautiful like Mrs. Adair, but I love you better than she did!"

"Curse her!" he exclaimed fiercely, "she was the first who awoke me from a dream of happiness and poisoned my existence by her words. Beautiful! who said she was beautiful, with her false, wicked, meretricious face?"

"But you loved her, Max!"

"Loved her? Yes, if you call a base ephemeral passion—an eye desire for sheer material beauty—*love*! Bah! You are mad, child, to accuse me of loving such a woman as that!"

"Any way, she loved you; and now she grudges you the happiness—may I call it happiness, Max?—that I have perhaps brought into your life. It is she who sent me the telegram that took me to

Morley's to-day. Erroll thinks so, and so do I."

Max listened to her words. Gradually his face grew calm, and he sat down again."

"I knew you were going to Morley's to-day when I left you this morning," he said, catching her hands.

"You knew!" she ejaculated, drawing away from his touch as if it hurt her.

"Yes. What makes you shrink from me?"

"Because, Max," she said, slowly rising, "you have acted dishonourably—cruelly! You sent the telegram. You wanted to prove your doubts."

"No, I swear I did not! Kneel down again."

Reluctantly she obeyed him.

"Quita, look at me straight in the face, that I may see if you are truthful to the core. I have suspected for long that your heart has gone back to Adair, but I de-

terminated to bear my wrong, to seek no explanation even, and to leave it to time to win you from him."

"What do you mean, Max? Could you doubt me, and live with me for a single day believing me to be untrue?"

"Listen! I have passed, this very day, through hours of as bitter misery as a man can go through; a thousand devilish thoughts and ideas have flashed through my brain. Child! with that sweet face, and those innocent eyes, you are either the falsest creature that ever trod the earth, or else there is a fate over us which we cannot avert. Therefore, though my heart breaks, it is best that we should part quietly and by our own desire."

She slipped her arm round his neck, and laid her head on his breast.

"If you will swear to me that you will be happier if we part, I will go!" she said firmly.

"*You will be happier, Quita !*"

For her answer, she drew down his face until his lips rested on hers.

"By that kiss I vow that I will not go, Max ! Are you tired of me already ?"

"Tired of you !" he repeated, "tired of you—my love, my life, my all ! Ah ! if you could read my soul, you would not ask such a question as that."

"I have read your soul, Max !" she whispered, "and I *know* you love me, and I love you, Max—believe that I do !"

"I *will* believe it ! I'll believe it against all evidence but downright proof, and will never doubt you again !"

She smiled, though tears glistened on her long lashes, and nestled closer in his arms. Yet Max, though he clasped her fondly, was not really happy. He saw his wife lose her strength and bloom, and though his heart ached over it, he could not regain the confidence, the utter delicious trust

he had in her in the early days of their married life—and married life is hell without mutual trust.

“She *is* pining for Adair,” he thought bitterly. “After all, she deserves more pity than blame, poor child. She married me out of pique and now repents it, for it would have been happier for her not to have put another bar between herself and him. And yet she seemed to care for me.”

He recollected Quita’s loving ways and winning smiles, and sighed.

“Yes; she must have cared for me a little; but she is of such a gentle loving nature that she must cling to someone. Poor pet, what a life of misery lies before us!”

“Good-morning, Mr. Vereker.”

Max was walking hastily down one of the streets in Mayfair, thinking these thoughts, when a brougham drove up, and

Mrs. Erroll Adair's voice startled him out of a brown study.

He stopped reluctantly and took off his hat, but ignored the hand she extended eagerly.

Seeing that he refrained from touching the slender pearl-gray encased fingers, she bit her lip and flushed, but in a moment recovered herself. Max was the only man she had loved, as well as she *could* love, and she bore from him neglect and even rudeness, which in others she would have hotly resented.

"Come here," she ordered playfully, "close to the window."

He obeyed, and though her warm breath swept over him, and her beautiful eyes dwelt softly on his face, he stood as impassive and really unconcerned as a marble statue.

"I have not seen you for ages. I did not dare come to your house, for Mrs.

Vereker does not like me, and you will not come to mine. Tell me, Max, are you going to throw all your old friends over for the new wife?"

"Not *friends*," he said pointedly.

"Am I not a friend? I fancied you knew I had *more* than friendship for you," she said, in a low reproachful voice.

Max coloured, not from appreciation but from sheer annoyance and disgust, at the look and tone.

"I haven't time to discuss the meaning of friendship or any other feeling to-day," he answered coldly, "I have an appointment with Cortland at four."

"À *propos* of the duke, I want to speak to you about him and——"

"My wife!" flashed Max.

"Then you are not ignorant of that little flirtation," she cried quickly, with a leaven of spite in her accents; "and yet you and Quita are——"

"Friends—yes; and if you will tell me what you have heard, I may be able to correct any errors in the statement."

"I came to my own conclusions long ago. A man who could live with his wife after finding she had kept the Duke of Cortland's acquaintance a secret, must be wanting in proper pride and right ~~feeling~~," she said insolently.

"Let him who has not sinned throw the first stone," Max replied quietly, though he grew very pale, and his blue eyes flashed like steel. "You don't know my wife, Mrs. Adair, or you would not depreciate your own judgment of human nature by believing her to be capable of evil. If all women were like her the world would be a Paradise."

"Fool's paradise!" she sneered. "Max, I never thought that a few babyish ways and innocent smiles would hoodwink a man with *your* mind," she said in a frank voice,

which was the very essence of consummate flattery ; but he was impervious.

"Thanks for the compliment. It would have turned my head when I was younger, coming from such pretty lips," he replied with a forced smile ; " but I am getting old and hard as adamant ; not even *you*" approbation can make my mind rise to the height of folly in discovering flaws in angels, and painting a lily black."

"I really think you hate me, Max !" she cried passionately, with tears actually welling up in her eyes. "Do you ?"

He looked at her for a moment steadily. He had called her face false, wicked, meretricious. He saw it now beautiful in its exquisite tints, its almond eyes, its little chiselled features, and its waves of warm ruddy hair, and, withal, a soft and tender expression leavening the whole.

"Not yet," he answered slowly, "it depends on yourself if I hate you later."

And he turned away abruptly from her appealing glance. "Get thee behind me, Satan," he muttered to himself, as he walked rapidly away.

By the time he reached home he had made new resolutions and plans. Entering the drawing-room he went up to his wife, and dropped his hand caressingly on her shoulder.

"I have some news for you, little one," he said. "I don't know if it will please you, but I hope it will."

She put up her lips to his ear.

"Is it that you are never going to be cross again?" she whispered, in a deprecatory voice.

A shadow passed over his brow, it hurt him that he should have inspired fear in one he loved so dearly.

"We are going to leave this next week. Will you be glad?"

"So glad!" she said, remembering the painful hours she had passed in the cottage.

“And we will go to Paris.”

“To Paris, Max! How delightful!” and Quita clapped her hands together like a child.

“And, darling, we will have no more care or quarrelling. My bonnie bird shall have nothing but sunshine, and forget the life she leaves behind her! I shall work very hard, not only for her, but for a little child which must see the light within the dear old Abbey, please God!”

And when Max looked down, the bloom of other days seemed to have come back to her face.





CHAPTER XIII.

LA REINE EST MORTE ! VIVE LA REINE."

"Love's eclipse ! Thou art in thy disease
A wild, mad patient—wondrous hard to please."

So Max and his wife went to Paris ; and, like two children, strolled side by side through that charming city—that city, so beautiful and so wonderful, that Quita believed it to be a fairy one, raised through the medium of Aladdin's famous lamp ; for she did not know that nowhere more tears were shed—tears so hot and so bitter, falling from burning eyeballs—

and pangs were suffered, and violent death-gasps given, than in Paris.

For all those things were kept far out of sight.

To the mere looker-on, there is nothing about bright gay Paris to suggest awful, and, alas! greater extremes and possibilities of crime, licence, and human anguish. It is her most brilliant face that the fair city shows in the Rue de Rivoli, the Palais Royal, the Champs Élysées, and the exquisite Bois. With the glorious and mellow splendour of the sun and moon reflected on its magical waters, the very atmosphere seems to burn with the glamour of fancy and the delicious poetry of romance.

Side by side the husband and wife, in reverential silence, entered Notre Dame, where the air was full of a faint and subtle fragrance, like a dream of incense; while streams of light, falling athwart the marble pavement, paled with their glory the steady

lustre of the sanctuary lamp, suspended in front of that majestic altar on which the holy hands of martyred prelates had offered the consecrated host. Under the grand old arches that had echoed the divine eloquence of the famed Lacordaire, the shadowy forms passed to and fro. Here and there, at the different chapels, candles flickered in the mellow gloom. Everything was full of an intense harmony; everything was wrapped in tranquil silence and a calm repose.

And the lingering sunshine and jostling crowd jarred on Max and Quita as they went out from the dim religious hush of the grand cathedral, and bent their steps towards the Louvre.

Max, if he was not a first-rate artist, had artistic appreciation in a great degree, and took to his pursuit with a zest and ardour which surprised him. In a short time his efforts were marvellous.

The long afternoon hours were spent by both amongst the glorious paintings and exquisite statuary gathered together in those gold-embellished halls.

It was worth anyone's while to roam and loiter at will there, and, after a time, to watch the close of day from the tall windows; to see the sunset streaking the amber sky, the evening vesper of light and perfume ascending; the glory spreading over the heavens, and resting like a huge benediction on the churches and the palaces, the gleaming river and the stately columns, the ancient "*quartiers*" and the new boulevards, of what the Count de Chambord called the town of Clovis, of Clotilde, of Geneviève, the town of Charlemagne, of Saint Louis, of Philip Augustus, of Henri Quatre, the glorious capital of the sciences, the arts, and of civilisation.

Max had begun work in earnest, and had grown absorbed in his copies of the old

masters or the vivid sunset pictures in the Spanish Gallery, whilst his heart was as tranquil as a child's, for Quita sat beside him. And thus two *couleur de rose* months pleasantly glided by, while winter came on apace.

They perched almost like the birds on the roof; their rooms were *au cinquième* in the Rue de Rivoli, close to the Louvre, and their finances were at a low ebb. But peace threw a radiance over the sky-high apartment that the Surbiton cottage had lacked; and Quita was content, although she had grown slight to painfulness, and her face looked all eyes, as it had done in childhood. But Max only saw the bloom on her cheek—a hot, vivid colour, that lent brilliancy to her big brown eyes, and he was satisfied.

But tranquillity of heart was not to be his portion for long. The death of the year brought death to his hopes, for he began

to notice an unwonted variation in his wife's manner that astonished and perplexed him, and she made a plea of laziness to remain at home in the hours he worked at the Louvre.

This worried him; but he said nothing, and sometimes when she looked unusually sad and desponding, he even forbore to question her.

She was grieving for Erroll Adair; the change to Parisian life had brought her "distraction" at first; but all change and amusement must pall beside the love of her life.

This was what Max decided; and then he, too, grew silent and white-faced, and reticent.

The real cause of Quita's changed demeanour was, however, far removed from her husband's conjectures. She had discovered a document torn in two, but yet legible enough, in an old valise belonging

to Max, which had lain in the bottom of a trunk full of discarded clothes. The letter was signed "Père Joseph," and was written in the French language, in a small foreign hand.

Quita had perused and reperused it several times before a light broke on her.

Then her face grew radiant, and, putting the torn fragments into an envelope, she stowed them carefully away.

"I have it," she cried joyfully; "Père Joseph, that's the name of the priest who married them. I'll work the thing out myself, without a word to Max. How pleased he will be when it's all accomplished, and I put the proof into his hands."

Quita went down to the old concierge with heart light and beaming eyes.

"*Bon jour, François.*"

"*Bon jour, petite dame.*"

François, concierge of Maison 23, Rue de Rivoli, had considerably passed half a

century, but he had a keen appreciation left of beauty, and the *petite dame*, with her big brown eyes and small flower-like face, had initiated herself into his good graces long ago. His little light orbs twinkled as she walked into his *loge*, and sat herself down, *sans cérémonie*, on the *banc* usually devoted to less dainty forms.

"François, I want you to tell me something," Quita began, with a seductive smile, and in the pure French which had been her tongue in childhood.

"Everything!" answered the ancient Lovelace gallantly.

"If one should want to find somebody in Paris, how would one do it?" she asked eagerly.

"Eh?"

François adjusted a pair of spectacles on his hooked nose, and then looked over them at her keenly.

Frenchmen, as a rule, are a little lax in

their notions, and he was not above the weaknesses of his compatriots.

Was the *petite dame*, with her childlike face and ways, just like those others, the Angéliques and Fanchettes, who were always in search of new lovers? Was she, apparently devoted to the *beau monsieur*, with *chevelure dorée*, and eyes as blue as the skies of Provence, really hunting for another "*bon ami*"?

Quita cleared her voice, and returned his keen glance with a frank innocent regard that puzzled him.

"I want to know, François, if there is any place in Paris where one can find the address of people?"

"That depends, madame!"

"Depends on what?"

"Depends on who the person is," François remarked slyly. "You see, if it is a grand count or baron, or perhaps a prince, his address would be easily found!"

Her face fell, and she shook her head.

"Is the person English?" he asked.

"No!"

"French?"

"I think so!"

The old man looked at her doubtingly, and sighed—so young, and so good to the eyes, and so lately come to Paris, and she had already found a lover in a Frenchman!

"I don't know of any place, madame."

Her mouth quivered with disappointment, and a couple of large drops welled up, and glistened like pearls on her long curling lashes; and François, a slave to beauty like most of his sex, felt his heart soften.

"*Pauvre petite ! elle l'aime !*" he muttered inaudibly.

"What *did* you say?" she asked quietly.

"Madame must tell me in confidence who the person is, even if she doesn't tell me his title. Madame must trust me."

"Of course I will, François, only you

must promise not to betray me to monsieur. If you do you will make me very unhappy," she cried beseechingly.

"Never! I should not be capable of that," he replied, warming up with pity and curiosity mingling together. "The person madame wants to find is a——"

He got up and shut the door, and lowered his voice mysteriously, and went over close to the seat she occupied. She jumped off the *banc* and put up her lips to his ear.

"*A priest!*" she whispered.

"*Sapristi!*" ejaculated François aghast. Then his face suddenly changed. The *petite dame* had become a "convert" unknown to her husband, and she was in search of religious advice. "A priest!" he repeated.

"Yes. Père Joseph."

"Père Joseph?" he said doubtfully. "Madame knows there are many Père Josephs in Paris. It is a common name!"

"True."

Quita dropped on nervelessly to her *banc*. She felt disheartened already, and the couple of drops that had shone on her lashes trickled gently down her cheeks, which had lost the colour of excitement and had waxed white as lilies.

"Still, this Père Joseph may be some well-known man," François remarked consolingly. "Any way, you might try and find him."

"Where?" but her tone was tame and despondent.

"By advertising."

"By advertising?" cried Quita, her hopes rising again.

"Yes; we must advertise. I will get it done, *petite dame*."

"At once, at once!" she cried impatiently; "you must go *now*, François."

"I cannot go till to-morrow; the English *milor* is ill, and I may be wanted."

Quita ignored the existence of an English *milor*. She was feverishly anxious about the matter.

And at last she persuaded François to put a boy for the sum of one franc into his *loge*, while he slipped out to do her bidding.

But it was no use ; neither the *Journal du Matin* nor *L'Écho du Soir*, in which she invested all her spare sous, brought about a satisfactory result, and she grew more and more disheartened. The only comfort she hugged to her bosom was the fact that Max, not having known of the subject, was spared the reaction of disappointment ; and in the intense excitement it escaped her notice that her altered mien, her unwillingness to accompany him to the Louvre, had aroused once more feelings which harassed him.

Could Erroll Adair by any possibility be in Paris ?

This was the question he asked himself night and day.

It was one of his especial days at his work, and he knew his wife would not expect him home for some hours.

"Good-bye," he said, as lightly as he could; but the word stuck in his throat, and he felt choking.

"Good-bye, Max," she answered quietly, never moving from her corner of the little horse-hair sofa, never so much as lifting up her eyes from the fire on which they were bent.

"Won't you come with me to-day, Quita?" He asked it in a low voice, in which there was a good deal of wistfulness, but she never noticed.

"I am so tired!" she said wearily; and at last she lifted up her great wan eyes towards him, with a broad *bistre* shade encircling them.

"Tired! Nonsense. You have grown

quite an affected fine lady," he cried angrily.

She did not answer, her heart was so full of soreness and disappointment *for him* that she could not speak. Dropping on her knees before the fire, she spread out her hands to the warm blaze.

"How thin you have grown," he remarked, noticing the delicate palms and slender fingers that looked like waxwork. "You'll lose all your beauty if you go on in this way, and then your old admirers won't look at you!" he went on savagely, lashing himself into a fury.

"Never mind if they don't," she said, with a forced languid smile; "as long as you don't mind looking at me, Max, I am content!"

"Pshaw!" he muttered, vexed at her duplicity, as he thought. "If you cared for my admiration, you would not grudge me your presence. Come with me to-day!"

"Not to-day, Max, please! I *am* so tired

and so cold!" and shivering a little, she bent again over the flame.

After that, he said no more. Shrugging his shoulders, and with a cold look creeping into his eyes, he marched out of the little room, down the five flights of narrow stairs, his handsome head erect, his figure as straight as a young poplar, but his heart bleeding within him.

As he reached the bottom of the staircase, and stood just outside the door in the little court belonging to the house, a poverty-stricken looking child, with sharp, pinched features, and hungry eyes, held up a bunch of violets.

"Faim, monsieur, faim."

They were the only words the poor little lips could utter.

Max put his hand into his pocket—finances were at a very low ebb with him—but, pulling out a franc, he dropped it into the small eager hand.

“Nearly the last of the Mohicans, but the violets will please *her*; and how famished he looked, poor little devil!”

Retracing his steps to the other corner of the court, he walked into the porter's *loge*.

François jumped off his seat and bowed obsequiously. Max was an aristocrat to the backbone. His whole bearing was thoroughbred, and, in spite of the hole in his purse, his clothes were irreproachable. To François he was a prince in disguise, and hence his politeness.

“Will you take this little bouquet to madame, from me?” Max asked pleasantly.

“*Oui ! oui ! volontiers, monsieur !* Will monsieur place it on that shelf, while I just make myself fit to be a messenger to madame?”

Max nodded, and lifting the flowers, was about to put them on the high mantel-shelf, when *something* met his eye, and

the violets fell from their high estate to the ground ; and Max crushed out all their beauty and bloom with his heel.

What he had seen was more terrible to him than the “writing on the wall” in the ancient days.

A square envelope, with “À Monsieur Erroll Adair,” and addressed to “23, Rue de Rivoli,” the same hôtel *garni* in which Max stood.

Dancing, burning, blinding, maddening, that address stared him in the face, that, in the space of a second, seemed to have aged years and years. He gave one gasp for breath, one wild anathema on Erroll’s head and—*hers* ; then he spoke to François, in a voice that, if it had not by a supernatural effort been toned down almost to a sepulchral whisper, would have rent the air by its intensified agony.

“You have other English families beside myself and madame?”

"No, monsieur, not families ; only one English *milor*, in the *éntresol*."

"For whom that letter awaits ?"

"*Oui*, monsieur ! I ought to have taken it up long ago," François answered, penitently, thinking monsieur would consider him remiss in his duty.

"Has the English *milor* been in Paris any time ?"

"Some weeks, monsieur ; but he seldom goes out."

"Ah !"

The old concierge looked up at the exclamation, and noticed that the speaker's face was curiously like a wooden image of a patron saint that hung up in a corner of the *loge*.

"I will take up the violets to madame now if monsieur likes."

"No, *merci* ! they are not fresh ; they have lost their bloom, so I have thrown them away ;" and Max stamped on the flowers once more.

"As I shall throw *her* away," he muttered, with a livid line running round his mouth; and, turning away abruptly, he walked rapidly towards the Tuileries.

He had left Quita cowering before the fire; but, after he had gone some time, she suddenly determined to procure old François' services, in aid of her search after the priest; and, quickly putting on her bonnet with its veil, and a long loose cloak that concealed her figure, she went downstairs and entered the *loge*.

"François, I want you to go with me to the passport office; you can tell them how important it is to me to find Père Joseph. They will listen to you. They think I am a child and scarcely answer me, except to laugh and pay compliments."

"Madame shall be obeyed. I'll go; but she must wait a little while. I have to go out, but shall be back in half-an-hour."


Quita prepared to wait, and was about to take her seat on the usual *banc*.

“*Tiens!* Someone might come in, and madame would not care about it. She can sit just in here,” and the concierge pushed a chair forward in a little recess, that was partially hidden by a brown curtain. A few minutes afterwards a man’s step sounded on the threshold.

“Any letters for me?” asked a voice close to the curtain, a voice so familiar, a voice once so dear, that it had been wont to thrill Quita’s heart to its deepest depths. She had schooled that heart into listening to those old tones more calmly now; but still, when they suddenly broke on her ear, she gave an involuntary start forward, and in that instant Erroll saw her.

Her, whose face lived in his dreams and in his wakings. Her, whom he had lost and whom he loved too late.

In a moment he was close to her, bending



over her, his eyes afire, his lips trembling, his hand clasping hers, but neither speaking.

In that sudden meeting words were denied to both.

And to the diamond-paned window of the little *loge* was pressed a face ; a man's face, white and stricken, with dazed eyes and compressed mouth ; and the form belonging to that face shook like a leaf in the blast. A sirocco seemed to sweep like gusts of fire upon him. A cold belt of iron seemed to encircle his soul. No surprise found a place there. Nothing ! nothing ! only a horrible, horrible realisation of all he had dreaded most—dreaming and waking.


Tottering like an old man, or a helpless child, he once more gained the street, groping along as though he were blind or drunk. The day was far spent ; the shadows were gathering around, and just a few pale lamps flickered over the dull damp

streets, and on his haggard features and tortured eyes.

Alas ! poor Max !

He thought his life was over. He had placed his all on a frail bark, and it had foundered ; he had put his happiness into a woman's hands, and they had played false. He had staked everything—hope, and faith, and love—on the fall of a die, and—lost !

“ Shall I get a divorce, and free her ? No ! She has deceived me, branded me for ever. Still, I *will* not let her go right out of my life. False as she is, I could not bear to see her the wife of another man ! Ah, God ! and I loved her so ! loved her as my own soul—better than my life, better than anything, except—honour ! I must not take her more into these arms that yearn even now—*even now*, poor pitiful wretch that I am !—to clasp her. I dare not touch those lips again, for their touch would degrade me, would draggle



my honour, my self-respect in the mire. She and I must never meet again!"

He gave a short, fierce laugh, that resounded in the street, and a few stragglers passing by turned to look after him as he swayed from side to side.

"*Il est sou,*" a man in a blouse said contemptuously. And it was true; he was blindly drunk with misery.

By-and-by the stars came out one by one, and among them, like a queen of beauty, sailed the moon on her bark of silvery clouds, and the soft evening air swept gently, stirring the leaves of the chestnuts in the Tuileries.

Max paused at last in his rapid walk, and striding to a bench that lay in the shadow of a large stone statue, he sat down, and, taking off his hat, let the cool air play on his fevered temples and aching eyes.


After all, he was not one of those limp, wanting backbone sort of men, who rest

supinely under grief or evil fortune ; his real nature was earnest and vigorous, and, though his heart seemed dead, his brain was quite alive and clear.

Later on, as soon as he could collect his thoughts, and his features grew calmer, he rose and went to a shop in the Rue de Rivoli, and wrote three words in a steady hand—"Good-bye for ever." Three little words, but bearing on their wings the *fiat* of two human fates.

A week after, Max and Victor D'Albret sat *tête-à-tête* at Vefour's small but famous restaurant at St. Cloud. They had done ample justice to the exquisitely-cooked viands, and had drank enough wine to warm their blood, while every now and then they flung smiles and badinage at a neighbouring table, where two women in *chic* toilettes were enjoying the soothing properties of cigarettes and *petits verres*.

Max looked as though he had hurled all



care to the four winds; but the iron was in his soul, and even now the memory of his wife rested beside him like the skeleton of the Egyptian feast.

But his handsome face was flushed, and his deep blue eyes were bright, while a gay *insouciant* smile bestrode his mouth.

"Victor," he said suddenly, in a low voice, "my wife has left me!"

"Left you! For whom?"

"For a rich man," he answered carelessly. "Women are only summer creatures. I thought she was better than most of them; but when temptation really came she dropped like a shot!"

"*Ma foi, mon cher*, you have not much to grieve about," D'Albret answered, with the national shrug of the shoulders. "You have always your English divorce, and plenty of pretty women will love you more than she did."

"True," said Max, in a ringing voice.

“Garçon, bring more Pomard. Mesdames, will you do us the pleasure?” he asked, bowing gallantly to his neighbours.

The next moment the four stood round the table, laughing merrily.

“*Trinquons!*” cried Max. “*La Reine est morte! vive la Reine!*”

And the glasses jingled together noisily.

END OF VOL. II.



